

Chapter 1: Alone in the World

31 December 1926

Merope Riddle had screamed out in pain as she'd pushed forth her son from her body, but even that wasn't enough to stop her wanting to hold him as soon as the doctor and midwife had delivered him. "Let me see him."

The nurse handed the baby to her after cleaning him. "What are you going to call him?"

"Tom Marvolo Riddle." Merope sighed happily at the pretty features her son already seemed to possess despite his squashed and reddened face. "After his father."

"She's bleeding." One of the other nurses noted a large red stain beginning to mushroom over the white sheet that Merope was lying upon.

Taking the baby from Merope, the medical team began to work to save her. An hour later, baby Tom was alone in the world.

1 September 1938

Tom Riddle sat down on the stool when Professor Dumbledore called his name. He didn't jump when the hat spoke to him in his head, and merely responded to its question as to his aspirations. "I'm going to be the greatest wizard ever."

The hat didn't need much time to settle on the house the determined young boy needed to go into. "Slytherin."

Tom took his place at the table next to some of the children who'd already been sorted, Abraxas Malfoy, David Nott, Frederick Mulciber and Selena Gregory. They were joined thereafter by Algernon Rookwood and Belvoir Rosier. Tom nodded politely at them and then turned his attention back to Dippet's speech.

10 June 1943

Tom stood in front of the second porcelain white sink in the girls' bathroom and hissed at it. Hearing a noise in the tunnel below, he turned his back on the basilisk he knew would come forth.

Having sealed the bathroom and believing himself to be alone, Tom was therefore surprised when a cubicle door opened, and a bespectacled girl he recognized as a Ravenclaw, Myrtle Seaton, stepped out. She started to make a demand of him. "Go..."

She didn't get any further than that as the basilisk reared its head out of the chasm behind Tom, and the girl met its deadly gaze. As her body hit the floor, Tom made a snap decision, and hissed at the basilisk. "Return."

As the basilisk retreated, Tom stood over the girl. "Effero Animus."

A silvery light appeared around the girl, and Tom knelt down by her, casting a second spell. "Aufero Pectus." Myrtle's heart was ripped out of her body and flew into the air and hovered in front of Tom.

Opening up his book bag, Tom withdrew a diary he'd bought to record his thoughts, and touched his wand to it. "Ratis Animus Tom Marvolo Riddle." As the last syllable of the spell was spoken, Tom collapsed to the floor, screaming in agony as white hot pain lanced through his body, and a black splinter of matter was spewed out from his mouth. It enfolded the silvery light before devouring the heart and vanishing inside of the diary. Tom panted heavily as he tiredly pulled himself to his knees, picked up the diary, and placed it back in his book bag.

As he struggled up onto his feet, he hissed 'close' at the sink, and any evidence of the entrance to the Chamber vanished. Glancing down at the girl, Tom decided to leave the gaping and bloody hole that had once been her chest. It would serve him better in what he had planned to cover his tracks.

30 June 1943

Albus Dumbledore found himself contemplating the young man standing in front of him. "That was quite a service you've done for the school by tracking down the culprit behind Miss Seaton's attack, Mr. Riddle."

"I was just doing my duty, Professor." Tom hid the smile that threatened to break free as he thought about how his idea of duty differed from that of the man in front of him.

"I suppose you were." Albus met the young man's eyes, and he suppressed a shiver that was trying to go through him. "Headmaster Dippet will speak to you on his return from the Ministry. You may go."

"Thank you, Professor." The moment he turned his back on his Transfiguration teacher, the smile Tom had been holding back escaped. He was aware that Dumbledore didn't trust him, no matter how congenial the man appeared to be.

Sitting in his office, Albus sat stroking his short reddish beard. He didn't know how he knew, but he was almost certain that the young man who'd just left the room had had something to do with Myrtle's death. Then he shook his head. He didn't want to believe that someone of Tom's tender years could have wreaked such havoc on a young woman, who for the most part, had been a pleasant if uninspiring girl.

Dumbledore sighed. He also wanted to speak to the Headmaster on his return. Despite what Tom Riddle had uncovered, Dumbledore couldn't bring himself to believe that Hagrid had meant any harm, but he knew that at that moment the Headmaster was overseeing the snapping of Hagrid's wand, meaning his expulsion from Hogwarts. Since he knew the half-giant had nowhere else to go, Dumbledore decided to make a plea on Hagrid's behalf that he should be allowed to stay, and become apprenticed under Ogg, the current groundskeeper.

14 July 1943

Tom's lip curled up as he surveyed the horrified looks on his father's and grandparents' faces as he revealed who he was. "And because of you, my mother died alone in a filthy Muggle hospital." Tom withdrew his wand. "And now you're all going to pay for it, starting with my disgusting Muggle father."

The elder Riddles' faces were filled with horror as a green light flew forth from the stick that the young man, who looked so much like their son, was holding in his hand, all evidence of life leaving their

son moments later. The looks of horror were forever ingrained on their faces as Tom then dispatched them both in quick succession, neither having a chance to flee.

Tom subsequently turned to leave, only to hesitate and turn back. "Do excuse me. I do believe I'm forgetting my manners. It was a pleasure to meet all of you." Tom smirked. "Well, maybe I should rephrase my statement. It was a pleasure to kill all of you."

Even though his final words had gone unheard by the three corpses, Tom felt so much better for having said them. He then vanished, leaving the bodies to mystify the village, and to provide them with plenty of fodder for their Muggle gossip for years to come.

1 September 1944

Tom made his way down the train and opened the door to the carriage where five of his 'friends' were seated. "Good morning. Where is Selena?"

"Sitting with her boyfriend." Abraxas couldn't see what the girl saw in Macallister Jameson, a Ravenclaw. "She said she'll see us later. We were beginning to wonder if you'd missed the train."

Belvoir noticed Tom's badge at that moment. "Head boy?"

Tom smirked. "What can I say?" After my courageous efforts last year in tracking down Myrtle Seaton's deadly assassin, I'm Dippet's golden boy." He glanced around the carriage's occupants, and noted no-one was wearing a prefect's badge. "I wonder who Slughorn got to replace me."

"Perhaps it's Selena." Abraxas knew the potions master had a soft spot for the girl.

"I'll find out." Tom hesitated a moment before leaving. "Meet me in the usual place tomorrow night at midnight. We have things to discuss." Not giving anyone a chance to respond, he headed down the corridor where, after checking with Selena, he found that she had been promoted to his spot; Slughorn making the unprecedented move of having two female seventh year prefects. Tom had a feeling that it was because both girls had excellent connections, and Slughorn still had Tom to call on.

22nd March 1964

Selena sat up in bed, and brought up a subject she wasn't sure Tom was going to take well. "Tom, darling. I was thinking about the name you call your followers."

Tom sat up and kissed her shoulder. "What of it?"

"Don't you think that 'The Knights of Walpurgis' is a little too feeble?" Selena asked tentatively. "It's hardly going to strike fear into the hearts of others when you finally show the wizarding world your true strength." She then played up to Tom's vanity. "Unlike the name of Lord Voldemort."

Tom had crafted the name using an anagram of his own name while still at Hogwarts, and he preferred it to his birth name. And only Selena was allowed to call him Tom anymore. "I expect you have an alternative for me, don't you?"

"I was thinking of something along the lines of Bringers of Death and Destruction." Selena hadn't quite settled on something suitable. "But it is a bit of a mouthful."

Tom stroked her back. "So what else would you suggest?"

Selena thought about it. "You want a name that will inspire dread in others; a name that will have them eating their hearts out in fear as they contemplate their own death."

Tom pondered what Selena had said, before coming up with his own suggestion. "How about Death Eaters?"

Selena debated the name. "I think it sounds perfect. How is the mask coming along?"

"I'm not going to wear one." Tom had debated wearing a gold mask as part of his outfit but had changed his mind. "Only my followers will wear white."

"What about the Inner Circle?" Selena asked. "Are you going with the silver masks I suggested?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, but it's going to be difficult to pick out the four I consider worthy of wearing them."

"Go with all seven of us then." Selena suggested as she ran a finger over the tiny dark mark on her ankle that looked like a magical tattoo of a snake and skull. "Lives are bound to be lost."

Tom grabbed Selena's hair so that she was forced to look at him. "You really are a nasty piece of work, aren't you?"

"That's why you keep me around." Selena reminded him, completely unfazed by his treatment of her hair. "And why I'm here in your bed."

"And that's where you'll be staying so long as you never do anything to piss me off." Tom kissed her roughly as he used his other hand to cup her breast.

"You know I'd never do that." Selena gasped out as Tom's hand travelled lower down her body.

"That's only because you know what I'd do to you if you did." Tom rolled on top of her. "You're mine, Selena."

As he began to make love to her, Selena stared up into the possessive face of the man she wished she'd married instead of her husband, and her mind wandered slightly as she thought about how he'd once looked. Because Tom's appearance had started to deteriorate after the second time he'd split his soul, he'd chosen to wear a glamour in public; something he dropped when they were alone. It didn't bother her, and she knew that he intended to carry out a ritual, which would restore him to his former healthy self, once he'd completed his sixth and final split. Her mind was brought back to the present as Tom coaxed the response he wanted from her and she cried out, before he did the same.

As the two lay together afterward, Selena wondered what the future held for them.

3rd February 1969

Selena gasped out loud as the door to her bedroom flew open. "Oh Merlin."

"Merlin indeed." Tom's face was filled with anger. "You cheating whore."

The naked man next to Selena attempted to grab his wand. His motion was short-lived as Tom killed him without ceremony. Selena backed up against the headboard. "It isn't what it seems."

"You're both naked in bed." Tom responded coldly. "Tell me what I'm supposed to believe it seems."

"It was just this once." Selena clung to the sheet as if it would give her some sort of protection against the black cloaked man who stood brandishing his wand in front of her. "You weren't supposed to be here. You wouldn't have known."

"You'd be surprised at what I know." Tom turned and put his hand on the door handle. "And I warned you what I'd do if you ever betrayed me, Selena."

"No, Tom, please. No." Selena's screams were cut off as the door closed.

31st October 1981

Voldemort stood in front of Godric's Hollow. "Wormtail. You will remain here. Acerbus, you're with me."

Inside the Potter House, James Potter made a valiant effort to try and save his family, but less than ten minutes later, lying among the rubble that had once been his home, little Harry Potter was left alone in the world.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers his heritage

Chapter 2: Harry, You're a Wizard

23rd June 1991

Harry Potter was a well mannered but insecure little boy. He lived with his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, and his cousin, Dudley. Harry didn't know why, but his relatives didn't like him. No matter how hard he tried to please them, nothing seemed to work, and he'd long resigned himself to the fact that he could do little except grin and bear it.

It was a bright summer morning when he opened the door to his room, a tiny and dingy cupboard under the stairs, and peered out. After making sure that his cousin wasn't anywhere to be seen, Harry sidled up to the front door, keeping his eyes peeled for Dudley as he picked up the post. His Uncle's voice suddenly boomed out from the kitchen. "Is that you boy?"

Harry decided he hadn't been quiet enough. "Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"Fetch the post." Vernon demanded.

Harry had already picked it up off the mat, and was looking through it. He didn't know why he bothered; no mail ever arrived for him. Today, however, was very different. Harry's eyes widened in shock as he found a letter addressed to him, and not only that, it was addressed to his cupboard. Slipping the letter inside his oversized custard yellow shirt, an old and raggedy cast-off of Dudley's, Harry hurried to take the remaining post to his Uncle. "Here it is, Sir."

"Be quicker next time, boy." Vernon only ever called Harry 'boy'.

"Yes, Sir." Harry was then spun around, a firm hand gripping his shoulder, and he addressed the bony, blond owner of the hand. "What do you need me to do, Aunt Petunia?"

Petunia Dursley had never liked Harry, not even as a baby. She'd only agreed to take him in because she and Vernon had been offered a substantive sum of money to keep her nephew. Money she'd spent paying off the mortgage on the house, and on her own son, figuring that Harry should be grateful he even had a roof over his head. "I've cooked breakfast already, so you can empty the

dishwasher, reload it, make some more coffee, and then wipe down the countertops, and scrub the floors."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry hastened to empty the dishwasher, only to have to stop when Petunia made a demand of him. "First, take Dudley his breakfast in bed. It's his birthday, and he deserves a treat before I take him shopping."

Harry kept his face clear of his true feelings about what Dudley deserved. Instead he picked up a tray, placed a knife and fork on it, and began loading up a plate full of bacon, eggs, baked beans, sausages, tomatoes and mushrooms, before adding that to the tray.

His aunt then placed a large mug of tea and a plate stacked high with hot buttered toast onto the tray as well. "Now take that up before it gets cold. And ask Dudley if he needs you do anything for him."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry lifted the heavy tray and carefully made his way upstairs to Dudley's room. Placing the tray on the side table outside the room, Harry knocked, and hearing a grunt, opened the door. "I have your breakfast, Dudley."

"It's about time, Potter." Dudley was sitting up in bed, playing a video game. "I'm starving."

Harry refrained from saying that Dudley could probably have lived off his fat reserves for quite some time, and placed the tray across Dudley's lap. "Aunt Petunia said to ask if you needed anything."

"I don't want you touching anything of mine, Potter." Dudley began to cram bacon into his mouth, using his fingers rather than the knife and fork that Harry had placed on the tray. "Get out."

Harry left, and hurried back downstairs, receiving a scolding from Petunia for taking so long. He was grateful when, an hour later, the house was silent, Vernon having left for work, and Petunia having taken Dudley shopping for yet more presents, to add to the massive pile that the boy already had waiting for him to open. Alone, Harry withdrew the letter from his shirt, and, with trembling fingers, used a kitchen knife to slice through the seal and open the letter. After reading what was written inside, Harry shook his head in dismay.

"As if I'd fall for that." Harry crumpled the letter up and threw it into the trash, believing it to be a joke of Dudley's.

Harry repeated the same action when more letters appeared, some in strange places, such as the refrigerator door, or partway through the cat flap. Harry wanted to confront his much bigger cousin and tell him to stop, but he knew that he'd just get a beating if he did, so Harry continued to ignore the letters, throwing them in the trash each time he found a new one. After two weeks, the letters stopped appearing, and Harry just presumed that Dudley had gotten tired of trying to wind him up.

Harry was shortly about to find out how wrong he'd been.

16 August 1991

Harry heard a knock at the door. "Do you want me to answer it, Aunt Petunia?"

"No. I want you stand there like a gawping duck." Petunia snapped. "Of course I want you to get the door. You do precious little else around here."

Harry hurried to open the door, and he was a little taken aback at the sight of the strangely dressed man standing there. What surprised Harry the most was the fact that the man was wearing what appeared to be a bright purple dress covered in stars and moons, and the fact that he also had the longest beard Harry had ever seen. Pulling himself together, Harry met the man's gaze. "Yes?"

"Is your Aunt in?" The man made it evident that he knew that Harry wasn't the son of the house owner.

"Aunt Petunia, there's a man at the door for you." Harry called behind him.

"Ask him what he wants." Petunia called back, unwilling to get up from watching her favorite afternoon soap.

"Tell her it's about your education." The man saved Harry from having to repeat his Aunt's words.

"Aunt Petunia, it's about my education." Harry yelled again.

Petunia got to her feet, grumbling. "You'd better not be in trouble." As she reached the hallway, and spotted the person at the door, she paled. "What are you doing here?"

"May I come in?" The man looked around him. "Or we could simply talk here."

Petunia had no intention of her neighbors gossiping about the strange man on her doorstep. "I suppose you'd better come in. Harry, go outside."

"But it's raining." The man pointed out as he closed the door behind him, trapping Harry inside. "And I believe that Harry should stay for our conversation. After all, it concerns him."

"Let's go into the kitchen." Petunia wasn't letting this man into her beloved sitting room.

Once in the kitchen, the man winked at Harry and waved his wand, a tea set and steaming teapot appearing on the countertop. "Would you like some tea?"

"No." Petunia's look of disgust displayed her feelings about the proffered beverage. "And neither does he."

"I think Harry should be allowed to decide for himself." The man turned to Harry. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No, err, thank you, Sir." Harry was still reeling from what he'd just seen, and he queried the act. "Are you a magician, Sir?"

"In a manner of speaking." The man ignored Petunia's snort, and turned his full attention on Harry. "My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I'm Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry."

Harry remembered that that was the name of the school on the envelopes he'd been throwing away. "But I thought that Dudley sent those letters for a joke."

"They were no joke, Harry." Albus said gently. "Harry, you're a wizard, and the letters you've been receiving were sent by my

deputy head, Professor McGonagall. We were getting a little worried when you didn't respond."

"He's not going to Hogwarts." Petunia finally found her voice again. "He's going to Stonewall Academy."

Harry wanted to ask how his aunt knew about Hogwarts, and more shockingly, that she didn't seem surprised to learn that Harry was a wizard. However, afraid of his aunt, Harry said nothing as Albus' voice lost its gentle tone, and his face became far from friendly as he refuted Petunia's claim. "Harry's name has been down at Hogwarts since he was a baby, and he will be starting in September. And I expect him to be on the Hogwarts Express on September 1st, along with his new classmates."

Petunia swallowed hard at a tone that brooked no argument. She was only too well aware of whom this man was, and what he was capable of but she still felt the need to thwart him. "We won't pay for his education."

"Harry's education has already been taken care of." Albus didn't go into further details. "And I will be taking him to purchase his school supplies today."

"But I don't have any money." Harry knew only too well, without Petunia's need to point out that she and her husband wouldn't pay for anything for him, that he was unable to pay for supplies.

"There's a fund to help pay for things that has been set up for children who are financially disadvantaged." Albus didn't reveal that Harry had money of his own; he knew that Petunia would try and get her hands on it if he did.

"Good, because I've already paid good money for Harry's uniform, and I'm not paying again." Petunia hadn't. She simply shrunk and dyed grey the red uniforms she'd bought for Dudley. He was attending Smeltings, a private school, but had already outgrown the uniforms that Petunia had bought three months earlier, and Petunia had refused to let them go to waste.

"Harry, perhaps you should fetch your coat." Albus instructed Harry, wanting him out of the room. "While I speak to your Aunt."

"Yes, Sir." Harry turned and head off to his cupboard to get the massive and threadbare coat that served as Harry's protection against the weather, both during the summer and the winter.

Albus scowled at Petunia, knowing only too well that Harry would bear the brunt of his interference if he said nothing. "If I hear that you have taken this out on Harry after I return him, then you will be very sorry, Petunia."

"You should be glad we took the little brat in." Petunia didn't bother to hide her hatred of Harry from this man. "He's been nothing but trouble."

"Then you should be glad that he's leaving to go to Hogwarts in September." Albus waved his wand at the tea set, vanishing it. "Remember what I said. I don't want to have to come back here again to speak to you."

Petunia swallowed. "He'll be there."

"Good." Albus smiled brightly as Harry rejoined them. "Come on then, my boy. We have a little shopping to do."

Harry looked uncertainly at his aunt. "May I go, Aunt Petunia?"

"Yes." Petunia almost spat the word out. "But you'll be doing your chores when you get home."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry followed the elderly man out of the house, and up the street. "The bus stop is just up here."

Albus smiled, and when they reached the bus stop, he held out his wand arm. "I think our bus should be here momentarily."

Harry's eyes widened as a triple-decker purple bus appeared out of nowhere. "Wow."

"Wow, indeed, young Harry." Albus stepped onto the bus and paid the requisite fee. "We'd like to go to Diagon Alley."

"Yes, Headmaster." Stan Shunpike looked at Harry with interest, wondering who the boy was. "I'd hold on if I was you."

Harry did exactly that, his arms nearly being torn out of their sockets as the bus leapt from standing still to a speed far quicker than Harry had ever travelled at before. Harry noticed the Headmaster barely shifted from his standing position. As Harry glanced around the bizarrely decorated bus, a chandelier shaking ominously above his head, Harry questioned the man next to him. "Sir, what is this bus?"

"This is a form of magical transportation. It's called the Knight Bus." Albus explained patiently. "There are several different other ways to travel but I thought this would be the easiest form for you this first time."

"Okay." Harry still didn't really understand how the bus worked, but fell silent until the bus stopped, and he was shepherded off.

Albus led the way along the street to a dark and depressing looking building, a sign attached to it announcing that it was called 'The Leaky Cauldron'. "This is the gateway to our destination."

Harry noticed that the people walking by barely took any notice of them. "Sir, can they see us?"

"Yes, but magic makes them dismiss us and the Cauldron as a figment of their imagination." Albus pushed open the door. "In we go, Harry."

After stepping into the smoky and dingy interior of the pub, Harry stuck close to Albus, feeling uncomfortable walking among the strangely dressed people. He jumped when a man blocked their path. "Headmaster, I didn't expect to see you in here."

"Nor I you." Albus turned and put his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry, this is Professor Quirrell."

Quirrell's eyes flew to the scar on Harry's head. "Harry Potter, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"You too, Sir." Harry didn't know if it was polite to shake hands with a wizard or not, and when Quirrell didn't lift his own hand, he was glad he hadn't tried. His views on shaking hands went out the window, only moments later, when Harry suddenly found himself deluged by people wanting to do exactly that.

Albus could see that the attention was overwhelming Harry, and he quickly extracted him from the crowd that had gathered. "I'm afraid that Harry has to be on his way."

The crowd respectfully allowed Albus to steer Harry out of the pub, the boy's head spinning. "Sir, why did everyone seem to know me?"

"Ah." Albus tapped his wand in a random pattern on the brick wall they came to, and the wall subsequently parted, allowing Harry his first sight of Diagon Alley. "That is a long story, Harry."

Harry's attention, however, had been diverted from himself to the sight in front of him, and his jaw dropped open, and he repeated his comment about the bus. "Wow!"

Next chapter: Harry becomes acquainted with Diagon Alley and Hagrid; and obtains his very first wand.

Chapter 3: Diagon Alley

Albus smiled at the wow that fell from Harry's lips. "It's not like any shopping center you've seen before, is it?"

"Where are we?" Harry craned his head trying to look at everything at once. And there was so much to look at. To Harry it seemed as if he'd been living in a world that was grey, and he'd now stepped into a world where every color of the rainbow had been blasted onto walls, people's clothing, and even into the sky.

Albus wasn't surprised by Harry's unmistakable interest. "This, my boy, is Diagon Alley, and it's where we will buy your supplies once we've been to Gringotts. And afterwards you can spend a little time exploring."

"What's Gringotts, Sir?" Harry stayed up with Albus, even though he really wanted to stop and look at everything, but as Albus had promised him he could explore on their return, he dutifully kept going.

"It's where your money is kept." Albus stopped once they reached the doors of a pristine white building, and he then admitted something to Harry. "Harry, before we go in, I want you to know that I wasn't truthful with your Aunt. You will be paying for your own supplies with money taken from an account you have here."

"Why do I have an account?" Harry was a little surprised to hear that he had money.

"It's a trust fund that your parents established for you when you were born." As Albus walked forward, the doors magically opened to reveal the interior of the business.

Yet again Harry's mouth fell open; this time it was at the sight of the goblins manning the teller desks that stretched along either side of the interior, a marble floor dividing them. "What are those creatures, Sir?"

Albus could see that Harry was a little alarmed by the sight of the strange beings. "They are goblins, Harry, and they look after the wizarding world's monetary affairs. They're very clever, completely scrupulous, and loathe cheats and thieves." By the time Albus finished speaking, they had reached a goblin whose name plaque

declared him to be Tarnok. "Good day, Tarnok. I would like to make a withdrawal from Harry Potter's account."

The goblin barely spared Albus a glance, his tone bored. "Key?"

Albus withdrew a long chain from his robes and pulled off a key. "Here we are."

"Diplok, take the Supreme Mugwump and Harry Potter to their destination." Tarnok called out.

Harry again stuck close to Albus as the two of them were led to a tunnel where a rickety looking cart stood waiting. Diplok made a demand. "Get in." The two hurried to get into the cart, and before Harry could draw breath, the cart shot forward into the dark depths of the tunnel mouth in front of them.

Never having been to an amusement park, Harry had nothing to compare the cart ride to, but his face was bright with excitement and enjoyment as the cart hurtled along the tracks, before coming to a stop outside of a door which was numbered 687.

"Key please." Diplok called out.

Albus handed over the key as he climbed out, and he then indicated that Harry should also climb out. Harry's chin was once again on his chest as he observed the piles of money that lay on the floor of the vault as Diplok opened the door. "Is that really all mine?"

"This is just your trust fund." Albus handed Harry a small soft black velvet bag. "The Potter family wealth resides in a vault much deeper than this one."

"You mean I'm rich?" Harry's voice, as well as his hands, shook as he put strange shaped and colored coins into the bag.

"You are. As the last living Potter, everything belongs to you, but you will not be able to access the Potter vault until you reach seventeen, so this money will have to last until then." Albus confirmed Harry's question, as well as warning him about how long he'd need to make his trust fund last. "It is also the reason why I didn't tell your Aunt about your money. She is your guardian and, as

such, has every right to access these vaults, and she would have depleted them leaving you with nothing."

As they climbed back into the cart, the vault door being firmly shut and locked again, Harry made a generous suggestion. "Perhaps I should give her some money. She never seems to have enough to buy me anything."

Albus' mild-mannered expression contorted into a scowl. "Your aunt was paid a liberal amount of money for your upkeep when she took you in as your father left a very generous allowance for whoever was to care for you."

Harry's bighearted thoughts vanished as he considered the meager helpings of food he received once everyone else had eaten, his secondhand clothing, and his living conditions. "So why didn't she use that money so that I could have clothes that fitted, or a real bed?"

Albus experienced a terrible pang of guilt at the despondent tone in Harry's voice. "Your aunt is a selfish woman, Harry, and she thought only of how she could benefit from taking you in. I therefore believe it would be in your best interests never to say anything to her about this money."

"I won't, Sir." Harry was now so caught up in his thoughts, he barely noticed the cart ride back, entirely missing a dragon that was blowing fire from its nostrils as it vainly tried to reach the group in the cart. Harry only came back to himself when the cart nearly hurtled into another cart, from which a slightly green-faced giant of a man was climbing out of. "Wow." Harry had never seen anyone that big before, not even on the television.

Albus smiled at what appeared to be Harry's favorite word of surprise. "That is Hagrid, Harry."

Hearing his name, Hagrid turned around, and his somewhat set face bloomed in a bright smile. "Got it for yeh, Headmaster Dumbledore, Sir."

Harry wondered what was in the small but badly wrapped parcel that Hagrid handed over to Dumbledore was, but knew better than to ask.

Albus slipped the parcel into his pocket. "Thank you, Hagrid. Hagrid, this is Harry Potter."

Hagrid's face broke into an even larger smile. "Yeh look just like yer Dad. But yeh've got yer Mum's eyes."

"You knew my parents, Mr. Hagrid?" Harry had never seen a picture of his parents.

"Course I did." Hagrid's face turned a little sad. "Shame."

"Hagrid, you can head back to the school." Albus dismissed the giant of a man. "I'm going to take Harry to buy his supplies."

"I'll see yeh at school, Harry." Hagrid shook hands with Harry, Harry's hand vanishing inside Hagrid's giant paw of a hand. "Perhaps yeh could come to my hut and 'ave tea."

Aware that the massive man had known his parents, Harry hurriedly agreed to his suggestion. "I'd like that, Mr. Hagrid."

"Yeh can jus' call me Hagrid." Hagrid ruffled Harry's hair and walked off.

Albus didn't have to be a mind reader to know that Harry was eager to find out more about his parents. "Hagrid can tell you more about Lily and James when you go to see him, but for the moment I will tell you that your parents were some of the bravest people I've ever met."

Harry had only ever heard his Aunt moan about his parents. "Aunt Petunia always said that my Dad was a drunk, and a waste of space."

"James Potter rarely drank." Albus was more than a little disturbed to hear Harry's discourse. "And he was a good father to you."

"What about my Mum?" Harry asked, desperate to hear about his parents now that he had finally met someone who wasn't negative about them. "What was she like?"

"She was gentle, and kind." Albus' eyes became misty as he thought about the red-headed girl who'd always put others before herself,

even when they didn't deserve it. "And she gave her life to save you."

Harry's hand went to his forehead. "Aunt Petunia never told me what happened when the car crashed; just that I was injured and received this scar."

Albus hid his anger at Harry's words. "Your parents didn't die in a car crash, Harry. They were killed by a dark wizard called Voldemort."

"In an accident?" Harry didn't realize who Voldemort was.

"I'm afraid that he deliberately killed them." Albus steered Harry towards a bright cream colored building on top of which ice-cream cones danced and twirled around, spraying into the air what appeared to be multi-colored sprinkles which dissipated before they touched anything.

Harry ignored the magical sight as he wondered what his parents had done to deserve such a fate. "Why, Sir?"

Albus led Harry into the Ice Cream Parlor. "Let's get you something nice to eat, and we can talk about what happened if you want to. What flavor ice-cream would you like?"

Harry was at a total loss. "I've never had ice-cream before."

Albus was beginning to wonder if he'd made a terrible mistake in sending Harry to live with his Aunt and Uncle, but he didn't reveal any of this to Harry. "Then I suggest we try the Chocolate Volcano for you."

Once he had his treat, and the two of them were seated outside in the sunshine, Harry's eyes grew wide when, as he put his silver spoon into the dish, his ice-cream bubbled up, and hot fudge erupted from the top, and chopped nuts appeared around the summit of his ice-cream mound. "How does it do that?"

"Magic, Harry, magic." Albus winked at him. "Now eat up."

Distracted from thoughts of his parents, Harry savored the first bite of his ice-cream, taking delight in the smooth, rich taste of chocolate,

something he rarely got to try. After half a bowl, however, he'd had enough. "I'm full, thank you."

"That's quite alright." Albus got onto the matter of Harry's parents before Harry could. "Now onto more important matters. Harry, you deserve to know what happened to your parents. I've already told you that they were murdered but what you don't know is that I believe your mother sacrificed herself to save you."

Harry wondered about the woman, who to him, was just a name. "Why do you believe that, Sir?"

"Because Voldemort was vanquished that night after he tried to kill you." Albus knew that this didn't really answer Harry's question but he also knew that Harry's attention would be diverted by what Albus had revealed.

"He tried to kill me?" Harry was shocked. "But I was only a baby."

"That didn't matter to him, Harry." Albus' face was grave. "Voldemort didn't care about age, color or blood. If you stood up to him, then you were his enemy. And even though you were too young to do that, to him you were just another victim." Albus knew it was too soon to tell Harry exactly why Voldemort had targeted him. "But here's where things get interesting, and why I believe your mother died for you. When Voldemort tried to kill you something went wrong, and I'm certain that the spell backfired. You did something amazing, Harry. You survived the killing curse. It's also the reason why those people wanted to meet you in the Leaky Cauldron."

"But lots of people must have survived him attacking them." Harry had no idea that the killing curse was always fatal if it made contact.

"Yes, but you're the only one to survive the killing curse. That's what your scar is; a remnant of an evil curse gone wrong." Albus revealed. "And because you survived, you're known as 'The Boy Who Lived'."

Harry pulled a face. "Does everyone know who I am?"

Albus nodded. "I'm afraid so. You are as famous as You-Know-Who."

"You-Know-Who?" Harry queried.

"It's what everyone else calls Voldemort." Albus himself wasn't afraid to say 'Voldemort'. "He became so powerful that no-one dared to call him by his name, and started using 'You-Know-Who' or 'He Who Must Not be Named'. And even though he's gone now, they are still too scared to call him Voldemort in case it somehow brings him back."

"Did he die?" Harry asked the obvious question.

Albus shook his head, wishing that that was the case. "I'm afraid not. He simply disappeared. I'm almost certain that the backlash of the failed spell destroyed Voldemort's body, but not his soul." Albus had researched old blood magic to come to this conclusion, as well as relying on intuition that Voldemort had done something terrible to protect his life. "So it's likely that he's still out there."

"But can he get me now?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No." Albus assured him. "But he is the reason why you live at your Aunt's house. Because she is your mum's sister, it provides a special sort of protection for you."

"But what about when I'm at school?" Harry asked, now worried about his safety.

"You'll be protected. Apart from Gringotts, Hogwarts is one of the most secure establishments in the wizarding world." Albus again reassured Harry. "And you only have to spend two weeks every year with your Aunt to top up your magical protection."

"Does that mean I could leave?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Is it really so terrible there?" Albus prodded.

Harry dropped his eyes. "No, Sir."

"Harry, look at me." Albus tilted Harry's chin up. "And tell me the truth."

Harry looked and sighed. "It's not so bad. I have to do a lot of chores, and I get fed at the end of the day."

"At the end of the day?" Albus queried Harry's comment.

"Yes, Sir." Harry panicked, thinking he was going to get in trouble.
"But it's okay, Sir. I don't mind."

"I might." Albus refrained from scowling. "Harry, does your Aunt ever smack you?"

"Only when I'm naughty." Harry answered, not being exactly truthful.
"But usually she locks me in my cupboard."

"Your cupboard?" Albus questioned.

"Yes, Sir." Harry played with his spoon as he answered. "It's my room under the stairs."

Albus frowned and withdrew a letter from his pocket, not bothering to have read the address on it when he picked it up. However, he did so now. "Where do you sleep?"

"In the cupboard." Harry said it in a matter-of-fact sort of way. "I have a bed in there."

Albus clamped down on his anger, and he decided that he had better help Harry do what they had set out to do. "Have you really had enough ice-cream?"

"Yes, thank you, Sir." Harry looked around. "Is there a bin?"

"No." Albus aimed his wand at the container and it disappeared.
"Let's go get your supplies."

First, Albus took Harry to get his wand. "Mr. Ollivander, you can come out."

A strange and frightening-looking man with moon-like eyes appeared. "Headmaster, I see you are in illustrious company. Hello, Mr. Potter."

"Hello." Harry responded nervously, not liking the eerie eyes the man possessed.

"Harry needs a wand." Albus said firmly, before Ollivander could say anything else. "And we're in a bit of a hurry."

"It takes however long it takes." Ollivander began to search through his boxes of wands. "Let me see. Let me see."

The first wand failed, as did the next fifteen, until finally, Ollivander tapped his fingers on a box. "Let's try this one."

Harry could have sworn he saw a brief look of surprise cross Ollivander's face when that wand too failed. "Sorry, Mr. Ollivander."

"It's not your fault, Mr. Potter." Ollivander returned to searching. "The wand chooses the wizard, and not the other way around."

Five wands later, and Harry found himself holding a yew wand with a chimaera scale core. As he waved it, bright silvery sparkles flew out of the end. "Does this mean that this is the right wand, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Yes." Ollivander was quite perturbed that the wand Harry was holding wasn't one of his. "That wand isn't actually one I made myself. It was imported as part of a batch from a dealer in North America, and the core is very rare but very powerful. It therefore looks as though you may be meant for great things, Mr. Potter."

"I don't think so. I'm just a boy." Harry placed the wand back on the counter. "How much do I owe you, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Forty galleons. I'm afraid that that wand is a bit more expensive than my standard stock." Mr. Ollivander took the volunteered cash that Albus counted out of Harry's pouch, as Albus was aware that Harry would have no idea how wizarding money worked.

After picking up his wand, Harry was then taken by Albus to a trunk supply store, where Albus told the owner that he wanted a trunk that could only be opened by its owner. He smiled at Harry. "He'll need your wand."

Harry handed over his wand, and watched in fascination as the shopkeeper did some interesting magic, and Harry's wand was handed back over. "Thank you."

The owner then passed the trunk over. "That will be two hundred galleons."

Albus reached into his own purse, and paid. "There we go." He tapped the trunk and it shrank to a miniscule size. "Put this in your pocket, Harry."

"How much is two hundred galleons, Sir?" Harry asked as they left the store and headed towards the store where Harry would buy his uniforms.

"A galleon is about five pounds, Harry." Albus could see how shocked Harry was by the price of the trunk. "The trunk was a gift from me to make up for all those birthdays of yours I missed."

"But..." Harry was almost dumbstruck, but he quickly recovered and remembered his manners. "Thank you, Sir. I've never had a proper birthday present before."

After what he'd learnt so far, Albus wasn't surprised to hear that. "Let's get you kitted out."

Harry found himself standing next to a blond boy, who after glancing at Dumbledore, said nothing but smiled in a friendly manner at Harry, and before Harry knew it they had both been measured, and Harry found his arms full of various pieces of clothing, which Albus helped him place into the trunk before closing it.

"I think Flourish & Blotts will be next. I've already taken the liberty of purchasing the supplies you'll need for potions." Albus informed Harry as they left Madam Malkins, and headed next door to buy Harry's school books.

The bookstore was what delighted Harry most. He liked libraries; they had deep dark corners where you could hide away, and this bookstore was no different. Harry turned to Albus. "Can I pick some other books as well as school books, please?"

"Go ahead." Albus collected Harry's books for the year, and he talked with various people until Harry came over with two small books. "Is that all you want?"

"I can have more?" Harry was a little nervous at spending too much money, given what Albus had said about making his money last.

Albus looked inside Harry's pouch, and handed it to him. "There's plenty of money in here, Harry."

Harry slipped the pouch around his neck and headed back into the depths of the library. As he walked by a section marked 'mythical creatures' he was smiled at by a young girl. Believing her to be like everyone else and that she'd recognized him, Harry gave a brief but discouraging smile, and headed over to the section on history. He was still standing there, frowning, when the girl joined him. Harry buried his sigh, and turned to face her. "Hello."

"Hello." The girl stared at Harry. "Are you looking for something special? I was looking for a book on Belly Busting Bees but I couldn't find one."

Unused to the wizarding world, Harry didn't query the girl's unusual reading habits, and merely told her what he was after. "I'm trying to decide on which book to buy about Hogwarts' history."

"That one." The girl pointed to the largest tome on the shelf. "But it's expensive."

Harry looked at the price, and noted that the book cost seventy galleons, and then looked into his money pouch. "I don't know if I have enough money."

The girl guessed that Harry wasn't familiar with wizarding money. "Are you a Muggleborn?"

"What's a Muggleborn?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Someone whose parents aren't magical." The girl took the pouch from Harry, and her eyes widened. "You have lots of money in here." The girl then explained the different coins to Harry, before asking her original question again. "So are you a Muggleborn?"

Harry shook his head. "My parents were magical but I live with my aunt and uncle, and they're not magical."

"Are your parents dead then?" The girl went on before Harry could respond. "My Mum died last year."

"Yes, my parents died when I was a baby, and I'm sorry about your mother." Harry felt sad that he'd never known his parents but he was sadder for the young girl.

"Thank you." The girl accepted Harry's condolences. "Mum was quite an amazing witch. She was always experimenting but then one day something went wrong. I was there but I couldn't save her." The girl sighed heavily. "But I still have Daddy."

Harry felt uncomfortable at the sad look on the girl's face, and he focused on the girl's father. "Is he here?"

"He's at the Daily Prophet; talking to them about a new press for the Quibbler." The girl informed Harry.

Harry had no idea what the Daily Prophet or the Quibbler was. "Oh."

"Are you here with your aunt and uncle?" The girl looked around Harry to see if she could see someone who might be with him.

"No, with the Headmaster of Hogwarts." Harry also turned around to point out the headmaster but his view of Dumbledore was blocked by several tall shelves full of books.

The girl studied Harry. "You must be important then."

"Not really." Harry realized that this girl had no idea who he was.

"I'm Luna Lovegood." The girl decided to introduce herself so that Harry would hopefully give her his name in return.

"Harry Potter." Harry waited for the excited response, but none came.

Luna merely nodded in acknowledgement. "That's nice. Daddy said you would be going to Hogwarts this year."

"Are you?" Harry asked, deciding he quite liked the girl although they'd only just met.

Luna remained on the subject of Hogwarts. "I'm too young but I'll be going next year."

Harry experienced a wash of disappointment. "That's too bad."

At Harry's words, Luna made a suggestion. "I know you're going to have lots of friends because you're The Boy Who Lived but I was wondering if you'd like to be my friend." Now she'd made the request, Luna also offered Harry a get-out. "But you don't have to if you don't want to."

Harry wasn't about to turn down an offer of friendship that didn't seem to stem from his newly discovered fame. "I'd like that too. I don't have any friends."

Luna knew how that felt. "Neither do I really. Not unless you count Ginny but she only plays with me because her brothers won't play with her, and her mum makes her."

Harry didn't bother to ask who Ginny was. "I bet she likes playing with you."

Luna wasn't so sure. She had once heard Ginny whining about having to play with her, and Ginny had called her 'strange'. "Maybe." Luna returned to the topic of Harry's friendship. "So can I write to you?"

"Yes, please." Harry's answer was eager. "I'll have to buy some stamps though."

Luna simply smiled. "You won't need stamps. You can use my owl." At Harry's confused look, Luna explained about owl mail.

Harry became despondent. "I'd like an owl but my Aunt wouldn't allow anything like that in the house." Harry knew that only too well from experience, his aunt having killed a mouse that Harry had found under the kitchen sink. Harry had hidden it in his cupboard, feeding it scraps from his own meager portions, and he'd named it 'Horatio'. When Petunia had spotted it, she'd killed it by dropping a paint can on it, and Harry had been severely punished for harboring what Petunia called 'dirty vermin'. Afterwards Harry hadn't been able to sit down for a week.

A voice interrupted Harry's misery. "I believe we can sort something out."

Harry and Luna both turned to find Albus standing there. "Really, Sir?"

"Yes, Harry." Albus smiled at Luna. "Miss Lovegood, your father is waiting for you at the information desk. I told him I'd find you."

"Thank you, Sir." Luna was a little in awe of the headmaster, having never met him before. She smiled at Harry. "I'll write to you."

"And I'll write back." Harry promised as Luna broke into a skipping gait and disappeared around the bookshelves.

Albus noted Harry's empty hands. "You haven't found a book yet?"

"Luna said that one is good." Harry pointed at the large tome on the shelf.

"An excellent choice." Albus lifted down the book and they both headed towards the counter where Harry paid for his schoolbooks and his leisure reading. His purse was still quite heavy, and he enthusiastically followed Albus out and towards the next store, where he was going to buy an owl.

Ten minutes later Harry was the owner of a snowy-white owl. "She's beautiful, Sir." The owl rubbed her beak affectionately against Harry's cheek. "Do you think she knows what I'm saying?"

"Owls are very intelligent creatures, Harry." Albus informed him. "And I think this little lady is no different. Have you decided on a name for her yet?"

Harry had been sifting through names in his head but hadn't quite settled on a specific one yet. "I learnt about a queen called Jadwiga in school. Perhaps that would be a good name."

The owl gave Harry a reproachful look, making Albus smile. "I don't think she likes that name. I've heard of Jadwiga. She was also known as Saint Hedwig."

The owl hooted and nudged Harry's cheek, making Harry smile. "I think she likes Saint Hedwig."

Albus made a suggestion. "How about just calling her Hedwig?"

The owl gave another loud hoot, and her name was decided upon. "Hedwig. You like that name, don't you?" Hedwig hooted again, and rubbed her beak against Harry's cheek once more to say yes. Harry was delighted but he did turn worried eyes to Albus. "What can I do with her when I return home?"

"I'll take her with me." Albus wasn't surprised when the owl flew to his shoulder and rubbed her downy white head against his cheek. "She'll be well taken care of."

"Do you have an owl, Sir?" Harry asked with interest as they began to head back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"No." Albus thought about his own familiar. "But I am friends with a phoenix called Fawkes."

Harry had only ever seen a phoenix on television in an old program that had been repeated called 'The Phoenix and the Carpet'. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Fawkes is a boy." Albus tapped the bricks at the wall they came to, and before Harry knew it, they were out of the pub and back in the Muggle world. A quick wand arm gesture, and the Knight Bus again returned.

Harry's happy smile began to degenerate as they got closer and closer to his home. When they got off the bus, Harry relayed his gratitude to Albus. "Thank you for coming to get me, Sir."

Albus knew what was bothering Harry. "I'm afraid that I have to take you home this time, Harry. But I will see you in two weeks' time."

Harry wanted to cry as he was delivered home. He had no idea that before he left, Albus gave Petunia yet another warning to deliver Harry for the Hogwarts Express when it left on 1st September.

In spite of Albus' warning, for the next two weeks, Harry's life was made more miserable than ever, as Petunia found the worst chores

she could possibly dream up for him to carry out. She had also crammed Harry's trunk into the cupboard under the stairs, making it impossible for Harry to lie out fully at night. Harry was therefore thankful when September 1st finally dawned.

Next Chapter: Harry heads for the Hogwarts Express

Chapter 4: Hogwarts Bound

1st September 2010

Harry had been lying awake most of the night; excitement that he was going to be leaving the Dursley household rendering sleep almost impossible, more so than the trunk that lay at the bottom of Harry's cot bed preventing Harry from stretching out. As soon as he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, Harry nervously got up, and opened the door. He was met by the sight of his aunt. "Good morning, Aunt Petunia."

Petunia didn't bother to return Harry's greeting. "Get your trunk and coat."

Harry turned around, and headed back into his cupboard, tugging out the trunk; Harry was glad that the headmaster had placed a featherlight charm on it otherwise he doubted he'd be able to move it. Harry then picked up his coat which lay at the top of his bed, before standing beside his trunk, and waiting for Petunia to say something. When she said nothing, Harry made a suggestion. "I'd better go and get washed up."

Petunia grabbed her coat from the coat stand, and picked up her car keys. "Forget that. You're coming with me."

Having little choice, Harry followed Petunia outside to where her small yellow Japanese hatchback was standing on the driveway. After putting down the seats, Harry was able to get his trunk into the back of the car, and successfully close the doors. He then sat in the passenger seat when Petunia ordered him to do so.

Petunia said nothing to Harry during the drive to the nearest train station. Once she'd arrived, she waited for Harry to get his trunk out, before handing Harry twenty pounds and a train timetable, and then hissing at him. "You can find your own way to London. I've got better things to do with my time than chauffeur a little freak like you around. And don't think you're coming home for the holidays, because you're not."

As ever, Harry still responded politely. "I understand, Aunt Petunia."

Harry was then left standing alone outside of Redhill Train Station as Petunia promptly climbed back into her car and drove off, not once giving Harry a second glance. Harry made his way inside the station, where he was helped by the lady behind the shatterproof glass window to buy a ticket with the Muggle money that Petunia had just given him. After paying for the ticket, Harry discovered that he had over five pounds left, and he put this into the inside pocket of the voluminous coat that he'd put on to combat the early morning chill. The lady then told Harry which platform to head to, and Harry soon found himself on a train, and pulling out of the station.

After alighting at London Bridge, Harry made his way to the Underground, and with a little help from a kindly commuter who showed Harry how to slide his ticket into a slot so that the turnstile opened, Harry was able to get onto the platform where the tube-like train came hurtling into the station a few moments after he arrived. Ten minutes later Harry arrived at Kings Cross. Having some time to kill, Harry went in search of breakfast.

An hour later, Harry stood on the platform for the Hogwarts Express. The train was extremely long, and he was almost spoiled for choice as to where to sit as there was virtually no-one else there, Harry having arrived three hours before the train was due to leave. Harry had managed to find the train when, as he'd been eating his breakfast at the restaurant on the main concourse, he spotted several tall students seemingly disappearing into the barrier that divided platforms 9 and 10. After taking his empty plate back to the girl serving at the counter, who winked at Harry and handed him a cookie, Harry hauled his trunk behind him, and headed towards the barrier.

When he'd first reached the platform, Harry's mouth had fallen open at the sight of the bright red Hogwarts Express, and Harry had begun to feel positive about this new world he was about to enter. Hauling his trunk up into the first compartment he found, Harry shoved it under the seat. Then, from his battered old black rucksack, another cast-off of Dudley's, Harry pulled out his book on Hogwarts, and began to read. Several hours later, when the train screamed out its farewell whistle, and with an almighty jolt pulled out of the station, Harry was glad to find he was still alone. But sadly not for long.

They had barely left the station when the door to the corridor opened, and the blond haired boy Harry had smiled at while shopping for his

uniform appeared. Only he wasn't alone; two of the ugliest boys Harry had ever seen stood in the doorway flanking the blond boy, who opened his mouth and asked Harry a question. "Are you Harry Potter?"

"Who wants to know?" Harry responded, acting braver than he was actually feeling.

"Draco Malfoy." Draco stepped into the carriage, now sure that this was his prey, and he nodded behind him. "That's Crabbe and Goyle."

Being a polite boy, Harry held out his hand, hoping that Draco wouldn't fawn over him. "I didn't get the chance to introduce myself in the store, Harry Potter."

Draco didn't gush over Harry, and merely shook his hand before sitting down, and nodding at the opposite seat. Like a couple of faithful dogs, Crabbe and Goyle also sat down. Draco noted the book Harry was reading. "Hogwarts: A History? Haven't you read that before?"

"I bought this copy when I went to Diagon Alley with the Headmaster." Harry placed his bookmark at the page he'd reached. "I thought it would help acquaint me with the school rules and the like, but I haven't had much chance to read it yet."

"So have you decided what house you'd like to be in?" Draco asked, not particularly interested in the rules.

"No, but perhaps you could tell me about them." Harry replaced his book into his rucksack.

Draco immediately launched into an oration. "Slytherin is obviously the best house. My godfather, Professor Snape, is head of it. We all get private rooms; well, you have to share with one other person but it's still better than the dormitories the other houses have. If you get in you can share with me." Draco had already agreed to share with Blaise Zabini, but after the talk he'd had with his father, decided his best choice would be to bunk in with Harry if the boy made it into the house.

"I'm more interested in finding a house where I can blend in rather than worrying about its' sleeping arrangements." Harry revealed what was driving his interest. "I received a lot of attention in Diagon Alley, and it was a little bit much."

"No-one in Slytherin house would care who you were." Draco was quite sure of this having spoken to his godfather about it.

"You'd better tell me about the other houses though, just in case." Harry urged.

"If you don't get into Slytherin, then Ravenclaw is the next best choice." Draco said confidently. "At least if you're clever enough, it is."

"I'm reasonably clever." Harry had always done well in tests at school until he'd had to start "dumbing down" to avoid being beaten up by Dudley and starved by his relatives.

Draco decided that Harry probably wouldn't make Ravenclaw then. "The last two houses are Gryffindor which is full of idiots who don't think before they act, and Hufflepuff." At the mention of Hufflepuff house Draco shuddered, and quite incorrectly stated what he believed to be true of the house. "Hufflepuff is where the leftovers go when there's no room for them in one of the better houses."

Harry glanced at Crabbe and Goyle. "What house will you be in?"

Draco answered for them. "Oh, they'll be in Slytherin. Their family has been for generations, as has my own. Yours on the other hand have usually always been in Gryffindor."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "I don't think I'd make very good Gryffindor material. Living with my relatives, I've found that I now think about things very carefully before rushing into them."

"Why?" Draco asked.

"Because they hate me, and I get punished if I do something wrong." Harry replied.

"What sort of spells do they use?" Draco had been subjected to some pretty rough ones at the hands of his father when he'd stepped out of line.

"None." Harry found himself wondering what chastising spells existed as he explained about his relatives to Draco. "They're Muggles."

Draco was disgusted. "The Boy Who Lived has been living with Muggles?"

"They're my only relatives." Harry informed him. "So I didn't have much choice."

"If you get into Slytherin, I'll ask Father if you can spend the holidays with us at Malfoy Manor." Draco decided to extract the boy from the unseemly influence of Muggles.

"Thank you but I doubt my relatives would let me." Harry immediately responded.

"Father has contacts in the right places." Draco announced loftily, just as the trolley witch arrived.

After picking out what they wanted, the four boys settled down to eat, only being interrupted during the remainder of the journey by a bushy haired girl who was helping someone called Neville find his toad.

By the time they arrived at Hogwarts it was getting dark, and Harry found himself getting into a boat with Draco and an unsmiling black boy, who Draco informed him was Blaise Zabini. The boats then moved forward on their way to Hogwarts.

Inside Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore watched as the first years filed into the Great Hall. He ignored the whispering about the latest intake; more particularly those whispers about the dark-haired and green-eyed boy who was currently standing in the center of the group next to Draco Malfoy.

After the Sorting Hat had sang a little ditty, one by one, the first-years were called forward until finally it was Harry's turn. Albus

waited confidently for the Hat to scream out 'Gryffindor', and was stunned when it announced 'Hufflepuff' instead.

Albus had explicitly told the Hat that he wanted Harry in Gryffindor so that he would fall under Minerva's care. Now he found himself wondering what had gone on between the Hat and Harry.

A few minutes earlier

"Now which house to put you in? Most definitely not Slytherin." The Sorting Hat had immediately dismissed the house that Harry had hoped for the moment Harry had placed it on his head.

"But my new friends are going to be in that house." Harry protested, not wanting to lose the only real friends he'd ever known. He couldn't count Luna as a proper friend yet as they'd only spent a few minutes talking together, and he had no idea what house she might get into.

"Quite." The Hat's tone was bordering on rude. "So what house for you will be right?"

Because the Hat had denounced Harry's first suggestion, Harry now made another one. "What about Ravenclaw?"

"I'll admit you're bright but it's not for you to study day and night." The Hat liked its own rhyme, and smirked to itself. "So let's discard Ravenclaw, and talk between us of it no more."

"If Ravenclaw is out then I want somewhere I can blend in." Harry knew where his request would probably lead him.

"So let me see if I've got it right, you don't want to be heard or in plain sight?" The Hat asked. If Harry could have seen the Hat on his head, he'd have seen the rip that acted as its mouth widen as it again grinned delightedly at itself.

"I've found it's better for me if people don't notice me. Slytherin would have been perfect. Draco said that people tend to mind their own business in that house." Harry told him.

"No Slytherin, nor Gryffindor then, even though you have the right stuff, so I suppose by default it's going to have to be Hufflepuff." The

Hat said the entire sentence, except for the name of the house, quietly. "Good luck, Harry Potter."

Harry took the Hat off and headed to join his new housemates. He was very unsurprised when Draco gave him a look of revulsion. Harry mumbled under his breath. "So that's the end of that friendship." He nodded politely to the others on his table who looked delighted that they'd got him, before listening to the Hat's continuing allocation of houses for the remaining students. Blaise Zabini was the final student to be sorted, and he went into Slytherin.

After dinner, Harry traipsed behind the seventh year prefects, Marjorie Banks and Henry Delaney, to a still life painting Harry thought looked awfully boring. After going through the door they went down a staircase, and headed into a common room. Harry knew that they were on the dungeons level but far from being dark and dismal, the common room the first years were led into was bright and cheery, decorated in yellows and blues.

Marjorie pointed out two tunnels. "The first tunnel leads to the dormitories for the boys. The first year dormitory is at the very end, and the girls' dormitory is through that tunnel there."

Harry soon discovered that the entrance to the dormitory was a perfect little round door. It instantly brought to mind the Hobbit, a book which he'd read in his last year of junior school. On entering the dormitory, the room too was circular, each bed being separated by a small wall. Harry noted that the circular shape of the room meant that each bed was equidistant to its partner. His trunk was placed at the foot of the second bed in a clockwise manner from the door, flanked by Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan. Wayne Hopkins rounded out the quartet.

His closest roommate, Justin held out his hand. "Hello. I'm Justin Finch-Fletchley."

Harry shook the hand, the boy's cut-glass voice telling him that he was obviously quite well-to-do. "Harry Potter."

Ernie glanced over at the boy, having grown up knowing his name. "You don't look anything like I expected you to." He walked over to Harry. "I'm Ernest Macmillan, Ernie."

Harry, and then Justin, shook hands with the boy. Harry thought he seemed a little stuffy. "What did you expect me to look like?"

"I don't know." Ernie hadn't really had a mental picture of what Harry should look like, just an idea. "Bigger, I think."

Wayne decided he'd better join the group. "I'm Wayne Hopkins. And why are you so special?" This was directed at Harry.

"He's the Boy Who Lived." Ernie couldn't believe that Wayne was actually asking.

"The what?" Wayne had paid little attention to the whispering that had been going on as he'd waited to be sorted.

"He's the one who killed You-Know-Who." Ernie's parents were among those who believe that Voldemort was gone for good, but they still couldn't bring themselves to call the long vanquished wizard 'Voldemort'. At Wayne's blank look, Ernie made a correct deduction. "You're a Muggleborn aren't you?"

"You-Who? A what?" It was obvious that Wayne wasn't the brightest boy in the world.

"Your parents aren't magical, are they?" Ernie asked.

Wayne shook his head. "It was a surprise to get my letter and a visit from Professor McGonagall. But Mum and Dad said it at least explained all the weird things that happened around me. Not that it had bothered them that much."

Harry resisted the temptation to rub his bottom as he thought about what his Aunt had done to him when weird things had happened. "I wish I'd known I was magical earlier."

Ernie frowned. "But you're not a Muggleborn."

"I live with my relatives who are Muggles." Harry explained for the second time that day. "I didn't find out I was magical until the Headmaster came to take me to Diagon Alley."

Wayne eyed Harry up. "If you didn't know you were magical, how did you kill that You-Who person?"

"His name is Voldemort." Even after Albus' warning about other people's feelings about the dark wizard, Harry had decided it was silly not to call him by his name; not understanding how much fear the man really had instilled into the wizarding community.

Ernie gasped, his face a little pale. "You said his name."

"It's only a name." Harry could see from Ernie's reaction that he'd have to watch what he was saying. "And I didn't kill him. He killed my parents, then attacked me as a baby, and something happened to him. I didn't do anything except to survive."

Wayne eyed Harry suspiciously, not really sure if he believed that Harry had done nothing. "So you're not going to go around killing anyone else?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, Wayne, I'm not. I just want people to leave me alone so that I can get through school, and eventually leave my relatives' house."

Losing interest, Wayne wandered off. "I'm going to brush my teeth."

Harry had the feeling that Wayne wasn't going to be a friend.

Ernie had weighed up what Harry had said about the night he was attacked, and before Harry could also turn away to start to get ready for bed, Ernie decided that Harry had to have a hand in destroying Voldemort. "You must have done something, Harry."

Harry sighed as he opened his trunk. "I didn't. I really am no-one special, Ernie."

"Okay then." Ernie was now even more disillusioned than he had been when he'd first spotted Harry, and he disappeared after Wayne into the bathroom.

Justin smiled sympathetically at Harry. "I used to attend a prep school called Ludgrove, and there were a lot of royalty who attended. They hated the attention you're obviously going to get."

"How did they deal with it?" Harry asked with interest.

"Told everyone just to treat them as they would anyone else." Justin explained, before thinking about the few who had reveled in the attention. "Well, most of them did. There were, of course, some boys who loved the attention, but you don't strike me as the type."

"I'm not." Harry's answer was fervent and immediate.

"Just so you know, I really don't care who you're supposed to be or what you've done." Justin smiled at Harry. "I'd rather just get to know you as Harry."

Harry grinned happily back at Justin. "I'd like that as well."

The two boys then rummaged through their trunks, removed their pajamas and grabbed their toothbrushes, and headed into the bathroom.

As he walked into it, Harry looked around with interest at the large cream and blue tiled bathroom, which contained four showers and washbasins as well as several toilets. After brushing his teeth, Harry climbed into his pajamas and got into bed. "Goodnight."

Ernie and Justin both called back, Wayne's loud snoring signaling that he was already asleep. Harry hoped that Justin would be his friend, having decided he liked the taller and friendly boy. Smiling to himself he closed his eyes, and soon the dormitory was filled with only the sound of soft breathing and snoring as all four boys drifted off to sleep.

The Next Morning

Harry woke up at five o'clock, and quietly picked out his clothes, and headed into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he was dressed and walking out of Hufflepuff. Remembering his way back to the Great Hall was easy, and Harry was about to go in when he was accosted by Albus Dumbledore. "Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning, Harry." Albus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and steered him, not towards the large double doors leading into the Great Hall, but towards a small door to the left of it. "Do you mind if we have a little chat before you tuck into the wonderful breakfast that awaits you?"

Liking the headmaster, Harry immediately shook his head. "No, Sir."

Once inside the room, which was empty except for a large wooden table and four matching chairs, Harry was urged to sit down by Albus. Albus then asked how things had gone for Harry since he'd left him. "I was glad to see you made it safely here."

Harry smiled at the Headmaster. "Aunt Petunia took me to the train station."

Albus was relieved to hear that the woman had done as he'd warned her to. "Did she accompany you onto the platform?"

Harry realized that Albus thought Petunia had gone to Kings Cross with him. "No, Sir. She took me to Redhill Train Station, and I caught some trains to get me to London." Harry was quite proud he'd managed alone.

"She left you alone?" Albus wanted to make sure he'd understood Harry correctly.

"Yes, but she gave plenty of Muggle money, and a map." Harry hadn't been bothered that Petunia hadn't accompanied him all the way into London. "I was okay. People helped me when I didn't know what I was doing. And I didn't mind, Sir."

Albus did but he let the matter drop, and move onto another subject. "Did she hurt you at all after I left?"

"No, Sir." Harry answered a little untruthfully. "But she did give me lots of chores to do."

Albus had spotted Harry's minute hesitation, and he repeated his question, this time a little more firmly. "Harry, did your Aunt punish you?"

"Yes, Sir. But it was my fault. I didn't get all of the oil up from the garage floor." Harry defended his Aunt's actions even as he dropped his head under the force of Albus' gaze and words.

"And what did she do to you for failing to do so?" Albus probed gently.

"She hit me with a mop." Harry admitted as he met the Headmaster's gaze again. "But it didn't hurt much."

"What else?" Albus didn't let the subject go, believing there to be more.

Harry's voice became subdued. "She wouldn't let me wear my coat outside when it rained and I had to trim the bushes. But that wasn't so bad." At Albus' expectant glance, Harry found himself telling the Headmaster about his Aunt's final punishment. "And she smacked me with a shoe when I didn't make it shiny enough." Harry didn't mention that it had been a heeled pump.

When no more was forthcoming from Harry, Albus checked that this was everything. "Is there anything else?"

"No, Sir." This time Harry was truthful.

"Thank you, Harry." Albus rubbed this beard, and brought up something that had been bothering him all night, the Sorting Hat refusing to discuss Harry's sorting with him. "Harry, I expected you to be in Gryffindor. Do you know why the Hat chose Hufflepuff for you?"

"Yes, Sir." Harry nodded his head violently. "I told it I wanted to be somewhere I could hide away. I actually wanted Slytherin so that I could be with Draco but the Hat refused."

Albus was thankful the Hat had. "Never mind. I'm sure you'll be happy in Hufflepuff."

"I think so." Harry gave a hopeful smile. "And I think I've already made a friend."

"I'm glad to hear it, my boy." Albus stood up. "You should head into breakfast. I have a few matters I need to attend to before I eat."

"Yes, Sir." Harry headed in the direction of the door and, after opening it, vanished from Albus' sight. Albus knew that his deputy would be sorting out timetables at that time of the morning, and he hurried out after Harry to speak to her.

Next Chapter: Albus takes Petunia to task; Snape gives Harry a hard time; Harry's flying lesson doesn't go to plan.

Chapter 5: The Flying Lesson

After leaving Albus, Harry headed into the Great Hall where he noticed that despite the early hour, there were quite a few students already eating breakfast, including Justin. Sitting down next to Justin, Harry loaded his plate up with food. He then happily munched away at his bacon and sausage, glad that he could put as much food as he wanted onto his plate without fear of being shouted at for eating too much, or Dudley stealing the food off his plate. It was also a novelty for Harry to be allowed to eat so early in the day. He spoke aloud without intending to. "I wonder if breakfast is always like this."

A second year, Roger Banks, who overheard Harry, told him it was. Harry sighed happily, and he turned to Justin, who was studying the schedule that had been handed out by Professor Sprout. "What do we have first?"

"Charms with the Gryffindors." Justin read off their first day. "And potions with the Ravenclaws this afternoon." Not wanting to have to sit with either Ernie or Wayne, Justin made a request of Harry. "Will you be my partner in classes?"

Harry knew then that he'd definitely found a friend. "Of course."

"Great." Even though it wasn't evident from his confident manner, Justin had been worried about making a friend in his new school. And despite the mutterings about Harry, he had taken to the dark-haired boy immediately.

The two boys gathered up their things after finishing breakfast and headed for charms. With the exception of having Ron Weasley staring openly at Harry, most people ignored him, and Harry found that by the time lunch had arrived, he'd enjoyed the morning. He'd particularly liked listening to the squeaky voice of the diminutive Professor Flitwick explaining the basics about charms.

Harry should have known that all good things must come to an end. And for Harry it was going to end with potions. Harry looked around the dungeon room that served as the potions classroom, and felt a shiver go down his spine. The room was dismal, and it reminded Harry of a room he'd sometimes seen in his nightmares. He was pulled out of his memories by Justin telling him to sit down.

In the classroom, the desks were arranged to seat three people, and Harry sat down on Justin's left side. The seat next to Harry was taken by a girl he knew was called Susan. He couldn't remember her last name, but when she'd smiled at Harry and asked if she could sit by him, Harry had nodded eagerly, glad that she wasn't sitting by him just because the chair was the last one open.

He didn't get a chance to learn Susan's last name as Severus Snape swept into the room, his eyes immediately falling upon Harry, but they continued past him to sweep the entire room. He then gave them the usual speech he always gave to the first years before taking the register. As he reached Harry, he put down his quill. "Mr. Potter, our new celebrity."

Harry had the sinking feeling that the Professor didn't like him. "Yes, Sir?"

"You will address me as Professor Snape." Severus snarled at the boy. "Name for me, Potter, one potion you could make if you used aloe juice and witch hazel."

Harry struggled to remember what he'd read when he'd glanced through his potions book in his cupboard under the stairs after everyone had gone to bed. "Err, err, Soothing Balm, Professor Snape."

Severus hid his annoyance that Harry was right, and asked a question he knew that Harry would have no chance of answering. "What is the stabilizing ingredient in Polyjuice potion, Potter?"

Harry hadn't even heard of Polyjuice potion, let alone knew what was in it. "I don't know, Professor Snape."

"Not as clever as you'd like to think you are, eh, Potter?" Snape smiled viciously. He then turned and touched the blackboard with his wand, writing appearing. "You've got one hour to make the potion on the board. And you'll be working alone. When it is complete, place it in the vial provided, and bring it up to the front."

His tongue between his teeth as he concentrated, Harry completed it in thirty minutes and took it up to the front. "I've finished, Professor Snape."

Severus looked dubiously at Harry's potion, dipping a piece of litmus into it. He was furious when he found it was the right color, and, after a second test, the right consistency. "Adequate. Get back to your desk."

Harry had the suspicion that Severus was not going to make his life easy, and he returned to his seat and started reading his potions' text in the hope that Severus wouldn't quiz him again.

At the end of the lesson, Severus assigned the class homework before letting them go. On leaving the classroom, Susan tagged alongside Harry and Justin. "I'm Susan Bones."

Harry held out his hand. "Harry Potter, and this is Justin Finch-Fletchley."

After shaking hands with both boys, Susan went on to discuss Snape in a hushed voice. "Professor Snape really doesn't seem to like you. My Aunt warned me about him."

Harry was interested in Susan's Aunt. "Has she had him as a teacher?"

Susan shook her head. "She taught DADA here for a year just after Headmaster Dumbledore employed Professor Snape. She said he favors Slytherin."

Justin joined in the conversation as well. "So why did your Aunt leave?"

"She was offered a position at BritAD." Susan used the common abbreviation all Aurors used.

Justin frowned. "What's BritAD?"

"It's British Auror Division." Susan gave the full title. "They police the wizarding world. Aunt Amy is head of it now. She did worry about taking the job though as I live with her, and she was concerned about my being left alone."

Susan's similar situation piqued Harry's interest. "I live with my Aunt and Uncle as well."

"Are they magical?" Susan asked as they sat down at Hufflepuff table.

Harry shook his head as he placed a large pork chop onto his plate. "They're Muggles, and they don't really like magic very much."

"My grandparents on my Mum's side were Muggles." Susan's face fell slightly. "You-Know-Who killed them when they killed my Mum and Dad."

"I'm sorry." Harry identified with the young girl's situation.

"It's the same for you." Susan correctly pointed out. "But Aunt Amy is really nice, even if she is a bit strict."

"My relatives are very strict." Harry couldn't say that they were nice.

"So is my father." Justin revealed. "I have to watch what I say and do in front of him. But Mummy is very relaxed."

"What do your parents do?" Susan was aware that Justin was a Muggleborn.

"Father owns his own investment company." A company Justin was expected to return to the Muggle world to take over when he was old enough. "But Mummy doesn't work."

Susan then asked about Harry's relatives. "What do your relatives do?"

"Uncle Vernon works for a drills factory, and Aunt Petunia stays at home." Harry had often wished his Aunt had worked as well.

Neither Justin nor Susan thought Vernon's job sounded very thrilling, and the subject was duly changed as the trio began to load up their plates with food.

Harry had no idea that while he and his friends had been discussing their families, Albus Dumbledore had left the school to go visit Harry's relatives. He found, however, that only Petunia was in.

Privet Drive

Petunia opened her front door to find the Headmaster standing there. "What do you want?"

"To talk about your treatment of Harry." Albus raised his voice, aware that this woman would find it uncomfortable. He'd also deliberately put on his brightest robes; bright orange ones with massive red and yellow stars that fizzed loudly in and out of existence.

"We can talk in the hallway." Petunia ground her teeth as she let the Headmaster in. "You wanted to talk about the brat?"

Albus wasn't bothered where the talk took place, and he immediately expressed his dismay at Petunia's treatment of Harry. "Petunia, you should be ashamed of yourself. Harry told me what you'd done to him after I left."

"The little brat deserved it." Petunia wasn't backing down. "He was derelict in carrying out his chores."

"I'd disagree. No child should have to do the things you made Harry do." Albus tried guilt to make Petunia see reason. "How would you feel if this situation had been reversed, and it was your son who was an orphan living with your sister? Do you imagine that Lily would have treated Dudley in the same way you've treated Harry?"

"She wouldn't have gotten the chance." Petunia responded smartly. "If anything was to happen to either myself or to Vernon, Dudley would go and live with his Aunt Marge. I would never have relied on my freaky sister, just as she should never have relied on me, and she should never have dumped her brat on me."

"Why do you hate Harry so much? It isn't his fault that you and Lily didn't get along." Albus couldn't understand why anyone would want to be so unkind to Harry; the boy was overeager to please, and certainly wasn't any trouble.

"He's a burden I didn't ask for." Petunia folded her arms, wanting this offensive looking man out of her home. "Is that all you came to say?"

Albus tried to look for good in everyone but he couldn't help but place this woman on the same level as Voldemort for having little or

no kindness in her. "No, it isn't. I'm going to be removing Harry from your custodianship."

Petunia's face reflected her joy before she thought about something that was important to her; money. "What about the allowance I receive for him?"

"As you know, Harry has to spend at least two weeks in your care every year for the blood magic to be effective. He will therefore still have to return here at the start of the summer holidays for two weeks." Albus had explained to Petunia why Harry needed to live with her in the letter he'd left with Harry when he'd first placed him on the doorstep of Petunia's home. "And you will be compensated fairly for his time here."

Aware that the generous income she received for Harry's care was going to be drastically reduced, Petunia bargained with Albus. "If he wants to come back, then I expect the full stipend, regardless of how short a stay he makes."

Albus was reluctant to pay this money-grabbing woman anything but Harry's safety had to come first, and the blood magic would be useless if he tried to force Petunia to take Harry in. "I will arrange for you to receive half of his previous allowance but there will be provisos. If you say no, then I'll take my chances with Harry's care." Albus was bluffing but he didn't want to pay money that belonged to Harry to this woman for her sloppy and ill-mannered care of the boy.

"Name the provisos." Petunia would still be receiving a hefty monthly allowance even with half of the payment taken away, and she knew that she wasn't going to give up so much money for the sake of a few provisos.

"Harry will eat meals with you and your family; you won't use him as a slave; he will have a proper room and bed; and most importantly, you will not ever punish him again." Albus set out what he was looking for.

"Fine." Petunia snapped. "But he will do his share of chores, and if he misbehaves, he will be punished. I won't have him running roughshod without any way of curtailng it."

"I agree that everyone needs discipline but there must be limits." Albus waved his wand, and said a few words. "The spell I have just cast will ensure that you don't overstep those limits. If you ever beat Harry again, then the same pain you inflict on him will be visited tenfold upon your own son."

Petunia didn't like Albus' threat. "You can't do that."

"How do you intend to stop me?" Albus asked in a calm voice.

"I'm not picking the boy up, nor will I chauffeur him around. You will arrange for his transportation here." Petunia changed the subject, knowing that she could do nothing against Albus, nor was she willing to refuse to take Harry in, the money driving her to say yes. "And nothing freaky."

Albus knew that this woman would never accept magic, and he assured her that Harry's transportation wouldn't fall under 'freaky'. "Harry's new guardian will ensure Harry's safe arrival and departure by a Muggle method."

Petunia terminated their conversation. "If that's everything then, I'd like you to get out of my house."

"Don't forget my warning." Albus opened the front door and walked out, leaving it for Petunia to close it behind him. He smiled to himself as thought about the spell he'd just cast. Contrary to what he'd told Petunia, Dudley would receive punishment if she hurt Harry, but it would be no worse than the pain inflicted on Harry. However, the pain Vernon would receive would be the tenfold that Dumbledore had warned her about. Popping a sherbet lemon into his mouth, Dumbledore reached the edge of the wards, checked around him, and vanished.

Saturday rolled around, and Harry was delighted to receive two letters: one from Hagrid asking him to tea that afternoon, and the other from Albus Dumbledore asking him to join him in his office at the same time.

Because he had to see the Headmaster, Harry quickly penned a note to Hagrid, and excusing himself from studying with Justin and Susan, he headed for the owlery. Hedwig immediately flew down as soon as she saw Harry, her tone scolding as she nibbled gently at

his ear. Harry brushed a finger over Hedwig's chest. "I'm sorry I haven't been to see you but lessons seem to take up all my time, Hedwig. I'd let you live in the dormitory but you wouldn't be happy."

Hedwig loved the openness of the owlery; she could leave and fly around whenever she chose to. Settling down, she waited for Harry's instructions. Harry affixed the letter to Hagrid that he'd written to Hedwig. "Please take this to Hagrid for me."

Hedwig was a little disappointed she wouldn't be travelling further that day, but she nevertheless took to the wing and disappeared out of one of the glassless windows as her master turned to leave the room.

It was several hours later when Harry realized he had no idea where the Headmaster's office was, and he had to approach Marjorie Banks, the seventh year prefect and sister of the boy who'd spoken to Harry at breakfast at the start of the week. "Marjorie?"

"Yes?" Marjorie looked up from the paper she was working on.

"I have to see the Headmaster this afternoon but I don't know where his office is." Harry shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

Marjorie noted the movement. "You're not in trouble already, are you?"

Harry didn't think he was. "No, Marjorie."

"It's on the second floor, and it's guarded by a gargoyle." Marjorie fixed Harry with a stern stare. "I really do hope you aren't in trouble because it's tough enough for Hufflepuff without our own bringing us down."

"I'm not in trouble." Harry again hoped he wasn't lying. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Marjorie returned her attention to her work as Harry left.

Headmaster's Office

Harry was met at the bottom of the staircase to the Headmaster's office by his transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall. "Good afternoon, Professor."

Minerva could see that Harry was nervous. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Let's go up, shall we?"

Harry was now afraid that, contrary to what he'd told Marjorie, he was in trouble. His face was obviously reflecting his fears because, as soon as he entered the office, the Headmaster got to his feet and allayed Harry's concerns. "Hello, my boy, come in, come in."

Harry was steered through the office and into a side room, which he discovered was a sitting room. A cheery fire blazed in the green tiled hearth, and four big cream colored chairs flanked it. On a cherry table to the left of the fireplace, a large spread of food including Harry's favorite sandwiches, corned beef, was piled up. Harry was maneuvered into a chair, and he waited to hear what Albus had to say.

Albus sat down closest to the fireplace, Minerva sitting opposite him. "Harry, my boy, before I tell you why you're here, I first of all want to apologize."

Of all the things that Harry had expected Albus to say, it hadn't been that. "What for, Sir?"

"Professor McGonagall warned me about leaving you with your relatives, but in fear for your safety, I chose to ignore her warning." Albus didn't look at Minerva as he spoke, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on Harry's face. "As I believed that your Aunt would overlook her dislike of magic because you were a baby. I was wrong."

Harry bit his lip as Albus continued. "I went to see your Aunt after learning of her treatment of you." On seeing Harry's frightened look, he hurried to tell Harry of what had happened. "We have agreed that you will only return there for two weeks at the end of the summer term. While there, you will receive three meals a day, sleep in a proper bed, and only carry out chores fitting for someone of your age. If your Aunt does not adhere to these terms you are to tell me."

Harry's mouth fell open. "B...."

He didn't get any further as Albus continued. "Let me finish, Harry. Now because you won't be spending all summer with your Aunt, with your permission, I would like to arrange for a change of guardian for you."

Harry was completely stunned by the news, but he quickly rallied to enquire as to the identity of his new guardian. "Who, Sir?"

"Me." Minerva joined in. "I wanted to take you in as a baby, but Albus felt that your safety was the utmost priority, and he refused. However, as your Aunt is almost as much of a danger to you as those who would harm you, he's finally agreed to let me take over your care." Her face softened. "If you want me to."

Harry had been a little nervous around the stern but fair professor but seeing her features form a gentle smile, he suddenly realized that she wasn't as frightening as she'd first seemed. "You really want to look after me?"

Minerva got up and took Harry's hand in her own. "I do, Harry. And if you ever have a problem or need someone to talk to, I'll be here for you."

Harry had never been treated like this before, and he didn't really know how to respond. "Err, thank you, Professor."

Minerva smiled. "When we are in private you can call me Aunt Minerva."

Harry was delighted by his new arrangements but he did have some questions. "Can I tell anyone else that you're going to be looking after me?"

Albus and Minerva shared a quick glance, before Albus answered. "I think it best you keep this to yourself for the moment. I don't want rumors of favoritism marring your time at school, and if it appears that Minerva has taken over your guardianship, this could happen."

"Okay." Harry understood Albus' stance. "So do I have to do anything?"

"Not a thing." Albus got to his feet. "I'm going to leave you and Minerva alone to talk together."

"I don't mind if you stay, Sir." Harry blurted out, still a little nervous around his new guardian.

"Then stay, Albus." Minerva instructed, recognizing that Harry had latched onto the elderly gentleman. "We can all have some tea together."

"Well, the house-elves did supply chocolate cake, so I think I'll do that." Albus beamed at Harry and sat back down.

As they ate the delicious food, the three began to talk about Harry's future, what he could expect from Minerva, and what she expected from him.

When quizzed by Marjorie later that evening, Harry simply told her that the Headmaster had wanted to discuss Harry's home arrangements, and the girl had gone off satisfied that Hufflepuff wouldn't be penalized for something Harry might have done.

Now that he had something to look forward to and someone he could trust and turn to, Harry became a little more confident, and quickly settled in. Professor Snape no longer frightened him quite so much, as he knew that Minerva would have his back. And it was obvious that Snape knew about the new arrangement as he all but ignored Harry.

So while the stumbling block of Snape was out of the way, Harry was now faced with another one, flying lessons. He had no idea what to do, or how awful he'd be at flying. Dreading it, the lesson came around far too quickly for Harry, and before he knew where the time had gone, he found himself standing outside, listening to his teacher, a hawk-faced woman called Madam Hooch, lecturing on the correct etiquette when it came to flying.

Keeping half an ear on what his teacher was saying, Harry looked dubiously at the broom that was lying at his feet, and he whispered to Justin. "Malfoy and Weasley have obviously flown before, and I'm going to look really stupid when I fall off."

"So am I." Justin whispered back. "I don't even like heights."

Susan, who was close enough to hear what was being said, grinned at her friends. "Don't worry. Most of the kids here have never flown in spite of what Malfoy and Weasley are saying."

Both Draco and Ron had been boasting about their flying prowess to anyone that would listen.

Feeling his teacher's beady eyes on him, Harry turned his attention back to what she was saying, hiding his snigger when she corrected Draco's grip. He was duly rewarded for his concentration when, after yelling 'up' in a forceful voice, the broom flew straight into his hand.

Justin copied Harry's tone, and he too was compensated in a similar fashion. Susan was having a little less luck with her broom until Justin got her to slow down and try again.

One of the Gryffindors, Neville Longbottom, also wasn't having much luck, and as he mounted his broom, it lifted up, carrying him up off the ground before bucking him off, a small globe falling from his pocket onto the ground a few feet away from where Neville landed heavily. Hooch had to take Neville off to the hospital wing when it became apparent that Neville had broken his arm, but not before issuing a warning to the remaining students about keeping their feet on the ground.

The teacher gone, Draco, who had spotted the globe, picked it up. "Longbottom is a butterfingers as well as forgetful." The globe was actually a remembrall, an item that helped you remember if you'd forgotten something, and Neville had received it from his Gran a few days earlier. Draco had tried to take it then but had been thwarted by Professor Flitwick. Now there was no teacher to stop him, and he threw the little ball into the air and caught it again, smirking.

Ron stepped up to Draco. "Give it back, Malfoy."

Draco climbed onto his broom. "Come and get it, Weasley."

Ron was about to climb onto his own broom when a bushy-haired girl, Harry remembered was called Hermione, hissed at Ron. "You'll get into trouble."

"I don't care." Ron mounted his broom and unsteadily rose into the air.

Susan whispered quietly to Harry. "See, I told you that he was just boasting."

Harry smiled as a very unsteady Ron rose up to face Draco. He did note, however, that in contrast to Ron, Draco seemed extremely comfortable on his own broom, giving his boasting some foundation. "Weasley really is going to get into trouble. He's barely staying upright."

"Summon the remembrall." Susan suggested.

Harry looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "I don't know how."

"The incantation is 'accio', and then the item." Susan informed him, having seen her Aunt do it on countless occasions. "I've tried it before but I can't do it."

"What makes you think I can?" Harry kept half an eye on the discourse that was still going on.

"You're the Boy Who Lived." Susan reminded him quite unnecessarily. "If you can beat You-Know-Who, you can summon something."

"I didn't beat him. I just got lucky." Harry whispered back. "And I'm going to look silly when I fail at casting the spell."

"And Weasley is going to fall if you don't." Justin could see the broom that Ron was on wasn't co-operating, and the boy was barely holding his seat as Draco flew higher and higher.

Not once questioning why this was his responsibility, Harry withdrew his wand, and aimed it at Draco. "Accio Remembrall." As he incanted the spell, he noticed quite a few of the students watching him, and he waited for them to start laughing when he failed. Therefore no-one was more surprised than Harry, when the little globe shot out of Draco's hand and flew through the air into Harry's own hand.

Ron gave Harry a surprised look but he was relieved to be able to save face, and flew back down to the ground.

Draco scowled at Harry as he flew over to him. "How did you do that?"

"I pointed my wand at the remembrall and summoned it, Malfoy." Harry's tone was totally sarcastic, hiding the fact that he'd been reluctant to try.

Draco flew down to the ground. "You had no right to interfere, Potter."

"And you had no right to refuse to hand over the remembrall, but you still did it." Harry retorted as Draco turned red.

Harry turned on his back on Draco and passed the remembrall over to Ron, who by now was standing by him. "Give this to your friend, and tell him to take more care of it next time."

"I could have got it." Despite his gratefulness that he'd been allowed to save face, Ron still felt as though he had to prove something to Harry.

Harry could see Hooch returning in the distance. "I know that but the teacher was coming back."

Ron glanced around. "Oh. Thanks then."

"You're welcome." Harry swung back round, only for Draco to hiss at him.

"I'm going to get you for that, Potter." Draco, like Ron, felt he had a point to make.

"Just leave him alone." Susan snapped.

"Need a girl to fight your battles for you, Potter?" Draco snorted and walked back over to where his sidekicks were.

Susan turned apologetically to Harry. "I'm sorry. I think I made it worse."

"It's okay." Harry assured her. "No-one's ever stuck up for me before. It was nice."

The two shared a smile, and then, like everyone else, turned their attention back to the teacher.

Next Chapter: Harry is challenged to a duel, and discovers something frightening lurking in the school. He also receives a letter.

Chapter 6: The Three Headed Dog

As the flying lesson ended, and the students started to head back into the school, Draco and most of the first year Slytherins cornered Harry, Justin and Susan just inside the doors. "You shouldn't have interfered, Potter."

"That wasn't your remembrall to take." Harry was quaking but stood his ground.

"You made me look stupid." Draco snapped, his face reddening with anger as he recalled how the Gryffindors had laughed at him.

"I thought those in Slytherin were supposed to be a little more restrained than the other houses." Harry repeated what Draco had told him during the train ride to Hogwarts. "Something you weren't. If it had been me I would waited, and I'd have found a far better use for the remembrall." Harry hinted that he'd have used it for blackmail, when in reality he'd have simply given it straight back.

"You're not a Slytherin, so I don't care about what you would have done." Draco's voice was strained, embarrassed at being shown up in front of his fellow housemates. "The hat was right when it made you a useless Hufflepuff."

"I'm glad it did, Malfoy, because I'd be embarrassed to be in Slytherin with someone like you." Harry could hear the shocked gasps echoing around the entrance. He wondered himself how he was managing to stand up against Malfoy; really all he wanted to do was run and hide, not stir up the confrontation.

"How dare you?" Draco's face grew even redder. "You have no right to talk to me like that."

"What are you going to do about it, Malfoy?" A voice came out of the shadows, and everyone turned to find George Weasley from Gryffindor standing there. "Whine about it like a little baby?"

Draco scowled at the third year. "No. I'm going to challenge Potter to a wizards' duel."

Harry's eyes widened as George continued to goad Malfoy, his voice mocking. "Are you going to fight to the death, Malfoy?"

Draco knew he had no chance of killing anyone but he brazened it out anyway. "Of course, Weasley, unless Potter's too scared."

Not really wanting to have anything to do with a wizards' duel, Harry gulped when George again answered for him. "He's not. I'm going to be his second. Name your own."

"Zabini." Draco saw his friend give a very unpleasant smile intended for Harry. "And when I win, for insulting me, Potter will make a public apology to me on his hands and knees in the Great Hall."

Once he realized that Draco's comment meant that the duel was unlikely going to end in his death, Harry finally came out of his nervous silence, and he again found the courage that he'd displayed before George had interrupted his and Draco's discourse. "I thought we were fighting to the death, Malfoy but I agree to your terms."

As Harry finished speaking, George stepped in yet again. "And when Harry wins, Malfoy, you will allow me to change your hair to Gryffindor red, and it will remain that way for one week." In the short time he'd been at Hogwarts, everyone, including Harry, had heard Draco boasting about his beloved locks.

Draco wasn't enamored of George's proviso; his hair was his pride and joy. But unwilling to lose face in front of the assembled group, which had by now grown much bigger, he ignored George, and held out his hand to Harry. "Accepted."

Harry shook Draco's hand, and George put in his final word. "Let us know the details."

As George and everyone else walked off, Harry remained where he was, muttering under his breath to himself. "So much for fading into the background."

Now, almost a week later, Harry found himself getting dressed to meet Draco at midnight in the Trophy Room. He was also supposed to meet George at the same place.

Justin pleaded with his friend as Harry pulled on his trainers. "Harry, you don't have to do this. Malfoy's an idiot."

"He has to." Ernie, who had also been watching Harry get ready to leave, called out. "Everyone will call him a coward if he doesn't go. And it's the worst form of insult if you renege on a wizards' duel."

Harry had been half-leaning towards Justin's suggestion of just not going, or of telling a teacher but now, with Ernie's comments ringing in his ears, he knew that he couldn't hide from what lay ahead. "I have to do this. I'll hopefully be back later."

As soon as he opened the door to step out of the entrance from Hufflepuff, Harry found George waiting for him, partially hidden by a suit of armor. "How did you know where I'd come out?"

"Because I obviously know where the entrance Hufflepuff is." George didn't, however, reveal how he knew that. "Come on. I know a shortcut to the Trophy Room." Draco had specified the Trophy Room and the time of the duel, as he'd been the one to issue the challenge.

As Harry walked alongside George, he questioned George's motives in offering to be his second, not quite as convinced as Justin and Susan that George had wanted to get at Draco. "Why did you offer to be my second? You barely know me."

"I know that but I hate people like Malfoy, and this was the perfect chance to see him brought down a peg or two." George gave his reason for offering, proving both Justin and Susan correct. "And don't worry. It had nothing to do with your being the Boy Who Lived." George suspected, quite correctly, that Harry didn't like the fame that went along with his title.

"I'm glad about that." Harry remarked before falling silent as they reached the Trophy Room. After ten minutes, Harry checked the time. "I would have thought Malfoy would have been here by now."

George stepped outside of the room, and glanced up and down the corridor. "I can't see anyone. I think he's reneged."

Harry was rather glad that Draco didn't appear to be coming as he had no idea how to fight a duel. "Why do you think he isn't here?" The question went unanswered as a mewling sound drew the attention of the two boys, and Harry gulped as he looked down. "That's Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat."

"So the little bastard not only didn't turn up but I think he also informed Filch someone would be here." George's mouth tightened. "We should leave before we're discovered."

The two boys hurried away, only to realize that Filch was blocking their way, his slimy voice reaching them as he talked to his cat, which had somehow managed to get ahead of George and Harry. Harry debated what to do, and decided he wanted to try and re-establish his initial desire to fade into the background, something that wouldn't happen if Filch caught him. "Let's go this way."

The two boys fled up a set of stairs and along a corridor, neither of them really paying attention to where they were going. As they reached a dead-end, marked by a locked large wooden door, George swore when he heard Filch closing in on their position. Having little choice, George unlocked the door barring their way to safety, and dragged Harry inside the room.

Harry, who'd closed his eyes in relief, leant against the door. "I thought we were done for." He then opened his eyes to see the biggest dog he'd ever seen. But what frightened him most wasn't how big it was, it was the fact that it had three heads.

He wasn't alone with his fear. George was a brave boy but the sight of what stood in front of him scared even him. "Harry, this must be the third floor..." George's voice trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Harry didn't care that they might be on the banned third floor that, at the start of term, the Headmaster had warned the entire school about not entering. He was too afraid to think about anything except for the large animal in front of him. Fear overwhelming him, Harry closed his eyes again, nervously started singing, and cowered down in the corner.

Standing over Harry, George was shocked when the dog also closed its eyes, and then began to sway in time with Harry's warbling tune, before it lay down and began snoring. "Harry!"

At George's anxious whisper, Harry opened his eyes to spot what George had witnessed. He stopped singing, and the dog started to

rouse. George frantically made a demand. "Keep singing. Keep singing."

Harry did as he was told as George opened the door and they hurriedly exited the room. Only then did Harry stop singing, but he again closed his eyes; this time it was in relief though. When he reopened them, it was to find George staring at him as if he'd turned into an alien. "What?"

George's voice sounded a little squeaky and tremulous to both himself and Harry. "How did you know how to do that?"

"I didn't." Harry's voice was also shaking, still scared from their encounter. "I freeze up when I get afraid, and I don't know why but singing makes me feel as though I'm safe."

"Normally, it wouldn't do that." George remarked wryly. "But thank goodness it did this time." He then glanced around, searching for the caretaker. "I think Filch has gone. You should return to Hufflepuff."

"What about Malfoy?" Harry remembered what Ernie had said to him before he'd left the dormitory. "He chickened out."

George smiled grimly. "I know that, and so I'll be dealing with Malfoy. I think he deserves slightly more than red hair."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked as the two boys walked back up the corridor.

George's grim smile widened. "You'll see."

The next morning Harry recounted his adventure with George to his friends, who both tried guessing why there would be a three headed dog in the school, but neither of them could come up with a good reason. And like Harry, they too couldn't wait to see what George had planned and were a little disappointed when, after two days, nothing had happened. Harry's disappointment, however, was curtailed by a letter, which a small chocolate colored owl came flying in with. Harry knew the only person likely to be writing to him would be Luna, and his face lit up that his friend had responded to his own missive. After passing the owl a slightly fluffy owl treat from his pocket, Harry took the letter from its leg, and opened it, eager to see what his friend had to say.

'Dear Harry

Thanks for your letter. Hedwig delivered it to me, and she's resting up before she returns, so I sent Galaxy with my letter. I'm touring Scandinavia with Daddy looking for Snorkacks and Grismacks.'

Harry broke off from his reading. "Susan, what are Snorkacks and Grismacks?"

Susan looked at Harry as if he'd gone mad. "Never heard of them. Why?"

"Luna said she was looking for them." Harry explained.

"Luna Lovegood?" Susan queried Harry's use of Luna's name.

"Yes." Harry could tell that something was up from Susan's tone. "I met her in Diagon Alley and she asked if she could write to me. Is something wrong with that?"

"No, of course not." Susan hurriedly assured Harry. "It's just that the Lovegood family is considered a little..." Susan searched for the right word. "...err, odd."

Justin, who knew that Harry was corresponding with the young blond girl, butted in. "Do they turn into vampires or something?" Justin had become fixated with vampires ever since he'd learnt that they existed in the wizarding world.

Susan smiled at Justin's assumption. "No but Luna's Dad is well-known for a paper he prints called 'The Quibbler'. It's a little peculiar and has weird stories in it."

"Like what?" Harry asked, his letter now laid aside as he quizzed Susan.

"Well, there was a story in the Daily Prophet just before we started school about how someone had broken into Gringotts but that nothing had been stolen." Susan knew that the two boys wouldn't have seen the story. "But Luna's Dad printed a story on the same day saying that it was Leprechauns who broke in to steal magic honey."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the story the elder Lovegood had printed. "Do Leprechauns exist?"

"Yes, but there's no such thing as magic honey, and if there was, it wouldn't be locked in Gringotts." Susan remarked in a sage voice. "And it's not just Luna's Dad. Luna's Mum was always considered a bit strange as well. She used to write a column in the Quibbler about true love. She claimed that if two people were meant for each other, she could tell straightaway."

"Do you think she could?" Justin asked, as like Harry, he had no idea of what was true in the wizarding world and what wasn't.

"Maybe." Susan hadn't dismissed the story as hokum like some. "There are seers who can tell the future, so Luna's Mum may have been able to tell if a couple were meant for each other. But Aunt Amy said that her claim may have been because of the potions she sold. They weren't illegal, but Lavinia Lovegood did quite well selling these potions, which she claimed could do the same as she could, and tell if someone was a person's true love."

"Luna told me her Mum died when she was making a potion." Harry brought up what Luna had told him.

Susan confirmed that what Luna had told Harry was true. "She did. Aunt Amy said that a new potion she was making went wrong. Poor Luna was actually there. Aunt Amy said it was awful." Knowing the Lovegoods fairly well, Amelia Bones had been one of the Aurors who'd attended the scene of the accident.

His overactive imagination filling the scene in for him, Harry decided he needed to be alone, and he therefore folded up his letter, and picked up his rucksack. "I'm going to the library. I'll see you both later."

Susan felt a little guilty that she'd driven Harry away but Justin assured her that Harry still hadn't finished his charms homework.

Once inside the library, Harry delved into his rucksack and pulled out the letter, which he began to read again.

'...Snorkacks and Grismacks. We haven't found any yet but Daddy said that they can become invisible if they're scared.

How is Hufflepuff? I want to be in the same house as you but Mummy always said that I'd be in Ravenclaw, and she was never wrong. She did tell me that I would marry someone from Hufflepuff though, and..."

Harry broke off from reading the letter again, and shoved it back in his rucksack. In his mind's eye he could see the blond girl in a wedding gown chasing him up the aisle telling him he had to marry her because her Mum said so. Harry suddenly shook himself. "I've been listening to Susan too much." But unnerved, he didn't take the letter back out of his rucksack. Instead he decided to try again with his charms homework.

He was about to take it out of his rucksack when he spotted Draco and his goons coming his way. He hoped they'd go away, so he picked up a book, which he'd pulled from his rucksack as he'd searched for the letter, as if to appear he was busy. Sadly his ploy didn't work. Draco still came up to the table he was seated at, and Harry scowled at him. "Malfoy, what do you want?"

Draco glanced at the name of the book that Harry had in front of him. "The Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2. Trying to look clever, Potter?"

"At least I understand it." Harry tapped his fingers on the book cover as he closed it, not wanting Draco to see inside of it. "Tell me what you think of it. I could only get a copy in English and not the original, and personally I find it loses something in translation."

"Whatever, Potter. I've got better things to do than to discuss a stupid book." Draco had no idea what the book was about, and nodding to Crabbe and Goyle to follow, he walked off.

Harry dropped his head, struggling to hide his giggles. Once they were under control, he looked up to find that Hermione Granger of Gryffindor was watching him. "Do you want something?"

"Do you really understand the book?" Hermione sidled over to the desk.

Harry looked around to make sure that Draco really had gone, and he grinned. He then pulled off the cover of the book revealing a copy of 'The Magician's Nephew' underneath it. "Not at all, so I junked it after trying to read the first few pages. I didn't want to damage this book so I used the cover of the Ethics book to protect it."

"So what about what you said to Malfoy?" Hermione's curiosity was now more than piqued.

Harry grinned again. "I heard someone talking about the books in the bookstore in Diagon Alley, and so I decided to buy one of them to see what they meant. Have you read any of them?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but unlike Malfoy I think I know what they're about." At Harry's challenging look, she summed it up. "The books were written by a Greek philosopher named Aristotle, who was a wizard. And he used the books to set out his thinking about human beings and their moral codes." Hermione's description was basically right but the books went far deeper than that.

Harry was surprised that Hermione had any idea at all of what the books were about. "You're really clever."

"My parents have always talked to me as an equal." Hermione explained, and unbidden went on further to tell Harry about her parents. "Daddy is a dentist but he also does research into the field of orthodontics, and Mummy is also a dentist who works with him."

"Are they Muggles?" Harry asked with interest.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, as she was already aware of the prejudices that existed in the school. "Yes, why?"

"I was just asking." Harry didn't want Hermione to feel uncomfortable, and he hurriedly told Hermione about his former living conditions, that he'd now only have to endure for two weeks every year. "I live with my Aunt and Uncle who are also Muggles."

Hermione decided that Harry wasn't trying to be rude, and she returned to the subject of Harry's book. "Were you about to read the Magician's Nephew?"

"Nah. I've read it loads of times already." The C S Lewis book had been one of Dudley's old ones that he'd never read. It hadn't flashed or banged, and it didn't have an 'on' switch, so Dudley had had no interest in the Chronicles of Narnia. Harry had therefore managed to take all seven books and hide them in his cupboard, giving him something to read in the night. The imaginary world had allowed Harry to escape from the misery of his own existence, and he'd often pictured himself as the High King Peter, but didn't think he'd ever be that brave.

"I really liked those books." Hermione, unlike Dudley, had always been interested in reading, and she also had a copy of the Chronicles. "When I was younger, it was nice to pretend that there might be an imaginary world in a wardrobe."

Harry didn't mention that he'd been hoping for the same, more or less right up until Dumbledore had come to his home, and told him he had a different world of his own he could escape to. "I bet you were glad then when you found out you were a witch." As he finished speaking, Harry shoved the book back into his rucksack and pulled out his charms homework.

"I was." Hermione noticed the textbook Harry had yanked out. "Haven't you done that yet?"

Harry went red at the astounded tone in Hermione's voice. "No. I was about to work on it. I'm having problems with the incantation to make my pencil twirl, and I've also still got to write a foot on what use a spell like that might be."

"I can't do the writing assignment for you but I will help you with the incantation." Hermione offered, an eager look taking its place on her face. "If you want me to."

"Please." Harry pulled out the chair next to him.

Hermione accepted the unspoken invitation and sat down.

Almost an hour later, Justin and Susan entered the library to find Harry folding up a roll of parchment, Hermione at his side. "Hi."

Both children looked up, Harry immediately remembering his manners. "Justin, Susan, this is Hermione. She's been helping me with my incantation for charms."

Susan had noticed the parchment. "And your assignment?"

Hermione disabused Susan of her notion that she'd done Harry's work for him. "I just looked it over for mistakes after Harry had finished but he wrote it himself."

Susan reddened. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Harry responded easily, before hesitantly making a request. "Err, would you two mind if Hermione joins us for study periods in the library?"

Still embarrassed by her accusation, Susan immediately shook her head. "She's welcome to."

Justin knew how tough Hermione was having it, having overheard a conversation between two of the girls in Hermione's year about Hermione being a know-it-all, and he suspected she didn't have any friends. He remembered how afraid he'd been that he'd be in the same position, and so, like Susan, he also agreed to the girl's inclusion. "Anytime."

Hermione smiled a little shakily as she held back tears of relief. She'd wanted so desperately to fit in but had found she had little in common with Parvati Patil or Lavender Brown, the two girls in her dormitory. Now she felt as though she'd finally found a niche. "Thanks."

And so the trio grew to a quartet that two people were rather jealous of, Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom. Ron, because he had wanted to be Harry's friend, and even though George wasn't part of the quartet, he'd already befriended Harry, and had refused to introduce Ron; George telling Ron to approach Harry himself.

And Neville, because he was jealous that Harry seemed to be brave, and people took notice of him. All of Neville's life had been lived in the background, and he'd rarely ever received words of encouragement or praise, and he'd always wanted to be like the Boy Who Lived, who he believed to be heroic and someone special. He'd

been a little disconcerted when Harry had been sorted in Hufflepuff but news of the duel with Draco had gone around the school like wildfire, once again cementing Harry's bravery in Neville's mind, and driving his jealousy even deeper.

Harry, of course, was completely unaware of either boy's thoughts or feelings, and apart from Hermione, his only interest in someone in Gryffindor was in George. He'd questioned George nearly every day as to when he'd get back at Malfoy but George had told Harry to be patient. It was almost a week after Hermione had joined their group when Harry's patience was about to be rewarded.

Harry was eating his breakfast when Malfoy and his cronies walked into the Great Hall. He glanced hopefully at George, his head drooping a little when the boy shook his head. If Harry had continued watching, he'd have seen George grin, and then begin whispering softly under his breath, his wand out under the table.

All heads in the Great Hall turned as a large newspaper appeared in midair from out of nowhere, and a mouth formed in the center of it. No-one could avoid hearing its announcement, the doors to the Great Hall slamming shut and sealing everyone inside, as the mouth in the newspaper began to scream the same thing over and over again. "Draco Malfoy reneges on duel. Draco Malfoy reneges on duel. Draco Malfoy reneges on duel."

Albus aimed his wand at the newspaper. "Finite Incantatum."

The newspaper ignored him, and continued until it had said the phrase thirty times. Then it fell silent before opening its mouth for one final comment. But it didn't repeat its earlier phrase; now a new one came out of the mouth, just as the doors to the Great Hall opened again. "Tricesimus Puniceus Aurum Coma Draco Malfoy."

Gryffindor, and a lot of the other children, burst out laughing as Draco's hair turned the Gryffindor house colors of red and gold. Draco shot out of his seat as he caught sight of his reflection in the silverware on the table. "Potter, you did this."

Albus and the entire school's attention turned to Harry, who like the other children, was still laughing. "Did you do this, Mr. Potter?"

Pomona immediately defended her student, as Harry stopped laughing. "This is far beyond Mr. Potter's capabilities, even given who he is, Headmaster."

Albus had to agree but since it appeared that the problem stemmed from both Harry and Draco, he made a demand. "Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter, you will come with me."

A short time later, Harry found himself standing in front of the Headmaster's desk, Fawkes staring intently at him. Draco was scowling at both him and the phoenix.

Albus sat down. "Did you two set up a duel that Mr. Malfoy appears to have reneged on?"

"Yes, Sir." Harry answered immediately, not about to lie to the Headmaster. "But I don't know whether Malfoy turned up in the end or not, as Mr. Filch surprised me, so I ran." Harry wasn't going to give George up.

"Mr. Malfoy, who else knew about this about duel?" Dumbledore hadn't sensed any duplicity from Harry, and as Pomona had stated, Harry was far from skilled enough to carry out magic that even he hadn't been able to stop.

"Most of Slytherin House, Sir." Draco had been boasting of how he was going to best Harry Potter, and he was sure that the Headmaster already knew this. Instead, he'd changed his mind about going when Blaise had suggested he get Harry into trouble instead. Draco was now angry with himself that he'd listened to Blaise, but like Harry with George, he too was going to keep quiet about Blaise's involvement.

"Then I think we know where to lay the blame for your new colors." Albus decided that someone in Draco's house had made the decision to quash Draco's boasting. He had no idea that George Weasley was actually responsible, and would never have suspected him as the magic in the Great Hall had been far beyond a third year's capability. Albus therefore didn't once entertain the thought that George had made use of his oldest brother's talents. "What were the terms of the duel, Mr. Potter?"

Harry told him. "I expected Malfoy to come crowing the morning afterwards because I'd had to hide but he didn't. So I just thought that the whole thing had been forgotten about."

"Mr. Malfoy, in light of what you and Mr. Potter have just told me, I can only assume it is one of your housemates who arranged this morning's display; hence the fact that the spell will only last three days and not the seven days Mr. Potter had stipulated." Albus didn't like the idea of the children dueling but he also didn't like the concept of reneging, and he decided to teach Draco a lesson. "Both of you will be serving detention tonight with Professor Flitwick for arranging the duel."

Draco put a hand to his head. "What about my hair, Sir?"

"It will stay that way until the spell wears off. I doubt I could remove it." Albus lied, and hid a smile at the boy's horrified look of dismay. "Perhaps you should ask someone in your house to do so. Now off you both go."

Conscious he was going to get nowhere with the Headmaster nor anyone in his house, when he and Harry reached the bottom of the stairs, Draco turned on Harry. "I know you somehow did this."

Harry grinned, feeling comfortable in baiting Draco. "But I'm only a useless first year Hufflepuff, Malfoy."

"I'll get you back." Malfoy warned, still believing that Harry had done this.

"And I'll be waiting." Harry walked off, whistling, knowing it would annoy Malfoy. He also knew that Malfoy had no way of knowing that his legs were shaking horribly from the encounter with the Headmaster.

In his office, Albus smiled a little sadly, the spell he had put in place on first taking his position, allowing the boys' discussion to reach him. And aware of what Harry was likely going to have to face later in his life, Albus was both relieved and saddened that Harry seemed to be growing a backbone. He had no way of knowing that George Weasley had been the impetus behind Harry's growing confidence, nor did he know that Harry still wanted nothing more than to become part of the background.

Next Chapter: A visit to Hagrid; Hermione develops a crush at Halloween.

Chapter 7: Halloween

October 26th 1991

Hagrid welcomed the four children with a big smile, and opened wide the door to his hut. "Come in. I was startin' to think that yeh had forgotten me, Harry." Hagrid had invited Harry to see him several times since school had started but each time Harry had had to refuse.

"I've been really busy with schoolwork." Harry wasn't making an excuse. While all of the teachers did give the children quite a bit of homework to get through, Professor Snape was the worst. He seemed to manage to pile an almost insurmountable amount of homework onto the children, and Harry, Justin, and Susan had been having problems in getting through the assignments. Only Hermione hadn't struggle, and she had offered to use her spare time to bring the other three up to speed, but it had still meant that the group had had little freedom to take Hagrid up on his offer to see his hut. And so it was only now, with a surprising lull in the constant output, that the children finally found time to visit the large gamekeeper.

Hermione suddenly gave a small scream when a rather large black dog came bounding out of the hut, barking excitedly at her. Hagrid reached out to grab his dog, but missed and the dog jumped on top of Hermione, knocking her to the ground. "Get off 'er. Stupid dog."

Instead of being savaged, Hermione found herself being licked into submission. Not that that was any pleasanter than the savaging Hermione had expected, as her clothing and face quickly became soaked with dog slobber. "Get it off me."

Hagrid reached down and pulled the boarhound off Hermione. "Sorry 'bout that. Fang is a bit of a softie."

"And he's disgusting. This is just nasty." Susan grimaced at the slobber. She then used one of the few cleaning spells she knew to clean up Hermione, who, of course, immediately asked Susan to repeat it so that she could learn it as well.

Harry could see that Susan's words had hurt Hagrid, and he hurriedly tried to make up for his friend's rudeness. "He's a nice dog, Hagrid. Have you had him a long time?"

Hagrid's despondent face lit up, his gigantic hand stroking Fang's head. "Since he was a pup."

Susan realized that she'd probably offended Hagrid, and she immediately moved to pat Fang as well. "He's seems very friendly."

Hagrid warmed a little towards the red-headed girl, as she tickled Fang under his massive head, and the dog closed its eyes in joy. "I think he likes yeh." Hagrid then remembered his manners. "Would yeh all like some tea?"

All four children decided to accept, and once inside the hut, they began to look around it with interest. In the corner were a rough table and four chairs, all appearing to be carved out of wood. A fire was burning in the fireplace, and over it was hung a massive copper kettle that was starting to steam, Hagrid already having placed it over the heat before the children arrived. There was another door but the children deduced that, as with the front door, it led outside. The only other major piece of furniture in the hut was Hagrid's huge bed, which was partially hidden behind a curtain.

A few minutes later, Hagrid poured out the tea into a variety of large and mismatched mugs. Harry had to use both hands to drink out of his, hiding a shudder at the overly strong brew. Courtesy of their families' tastes, Susan and Hermione were used to strong tea, and they drank their beverages without problem. Justin, however, was used to taking his tea with lemon or a splash of milk, and he therefore waited for Hagrid to turn away, before he poured most of his tea into a plant pot that contained a rather bedraggled plant, which looked as though it might benefit from the dark and syrupy offering.

Putting down her mug, Susan found that Fang obviously wasn't upset by her comments, because Fang had placed his head on her leg, and was now currently drooling over her skirt. Deciding to try and make up for her initial rudeness, Susan ignored the mess, and instead stroked Fang's head, making the dog give a happy sigh and drool all the more. "So you like dogs then, Hagrid?"

"Yeah, but I like lots of creatures." Hagrid's face became what could only be described as 'gooey' as he thought about all the creatures he'd like to own. "But truth be told, always wanted a dragon."

Harry's eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "A dragon?"

"Jus' a baby one." Hagrid conveniently decided to forget that dragons didn't stay small.

"That's nice." Hermione thought Hagrid was mad. She'd already read about dragons, and had immediately decided that she'd steer clear of anything with razor sharp teeth and claws, and the ability to breath fire.

"Hagrid, while we're on the subject of unusual creatures..." Harry kept his voice innocent and light. "...would you like a three headed dog?"

Hagrid, as usual, didn't think before responding. "Got one already."

"Is the three headed dog in the school your dog then?" Harry asked pointblank.

"Yeh mean Fluffy?" Hagrid questioned Harry's mention of the dog.

"Fluffy?" Harry's voice grew high pitched. "You call that monster Fluffy?"

"He's a big softie at 'art, jus' like Fang 'ere." Hagrid said the same about the three headed dog as he had about his boarhound. "He's a good boy."

"I'll take your word for it." Harry didn't believe Hagrid though.

It was then that it occurred to Hagrid that Harry shouldn't have even known about the dog. "So, 'ow did yeh see Fluffy?"

"Took a wrong turn." Harry answered quite truthfully. "What's he doing in the school?"

Hagrid got to his feet and starting gathering the mugs, his discomfiture at Harry's questioning, patently obvious. "Needed somewhere to stay. Now I'm afraid you'll 'ave to be off now. Things ter do."

The four children found themselves unceremoniously bundled out of Hagrid's hut, and Hermione walked next to Harry as they made their way back to the school. "Well, Fluffy is definitely guarding something, and I think Hagrid knows what it is. He couldn't wait to get rid of us."

"Fluffy was sitting on a trapdoor, so you might be right." Harry had replayed the horror of the dog over and over in his mind, the image of the large paws resting on the trapdoor forever burned into his memory. "But what could it be guarding?"

"How about whatever someone tried to steal from Gringotts?" Justin suggested, recalling the break-in that Susan had mentioned some time ago. "Even I know now that Hogwarts is just as safe."

"But how did it get here?" Susan asked, trying to make the connection. "And what is it?"

Harry went very red, and Hermione noticed. "I think Harry knows."

"I don't know what Fluffy is guarding." Harry believed in keeping secrets, particularly for someone as important as Dumbledore, and he had a niggling feeling that the mysterious item that Hagrid had handed over to Dumbledore was whatever Fluffy was guarding.

Hermione, however, believed in getting to the bottom of things, and proceeded to grill Harry. "You went shopping with Dumbledore on the day Gringotts was broken into, didn't you?"

"Yes." Harry started to shift uncomfortably, already working out where Hermione's questioning was going.

"And you went to Gringotts with Professor Dumbledore, didn't you?" Hermione was like a bloodhound honing in on her prey.

"Yes." The word left Harry's lips in a slow sigh.

"Did Professor Dumbledore take something out of Gringotts?" Hermione asked in a triumphant voice, expecting Harry to say 'yes' again.

He didn't. "No, we just went to my vault, took out my money, and we went shopping afterwards."

"Oh." Hermione's theory went out of the window, and she visibly deflated.

An aficionado of detective novels, courtesy of his mother, Justin wasn't ready to give up. "So perhaps the Headmaster didn't take anything out when Harry was there. What if the goblins asked him to take care of whatever was hidden in Gringotts before he got Harry, or perhaps Hagrid knows when it got here, seeing as it's his dog guarding the trapdoor?"

Hermione cheered up, and she turned around. "Let's go ask Hagrid."

Harry shook his head. "He probably won't answer us."

"Let's go see." Hermione was determined, but her mission was about to end by Susan.

"I don't think he'll answer the door. Look how anxious he was to get rid of us." Susan slipped her arm through Hermione's so that she couldn't return. "Come on, we should wait for a bit and see what happens. If we can't work out what Fluffy is guarding, then we can come back and visit Hagrid."

Harry tried to dissuade his friends from doing exactly that. "Does it matter what Fluffy is guarding? We're not supposed to be on the third floor where Fluffy is, so why waste our time investigating, and hassling Hagrid?"

Hermione had forgotten about the Headmaster's strict warning, and she backed off a little as Harry's words brought it to mind. But deep down, her curiosity was raging and she wanted to know what the three headed beast Harry had seen was safeguarding. "Okay, we'll leave Hagrid alone for the moment then."

However, despite his words about not wasting time pursuing the mystery of the three headed dog, Justin, Susan and Hermione had no idea that Harry, like them, was also intrigued. After shaking off his friends by pretending he still had homework to do, Harry headed to the library where he penned a missive to Luna Lovegood to ask for her opinion.

Just over two weeks later, Susan and Justin found Harry sitting at the breakfast table, his concentration fully upon the letter he'd

received from Luna. He finally realized that someone was calling his name. "Sorry, what is it?"

"I said, is that from Luna?" Susan repeated her earlier question.

"Yes." Harry put the letter down, but didn't tell Susan what it was about.

"And what does she have to say?" Justin sat down, popping a crispy piece of bacon into his mouth.

"She's not writing to me about those snorkie things if that's what you mean." Harry couldn't recall what the animals were called.

"They're called Snorkacks and they might actually be real." Susan had the good grace to blush as she spoke.

"But you said..." Harry's voice trailed off as Susan started talking again.

"I know but I wrote to Aunt Amy about the Snorkacks, and she had someone investigate it for me." Susan filled in Harry on what her Aunt's reaction had been.

"Why would the head of BritAD bother with something as insignificant as what we believed was an imaginary animal?" Justin questioned Susan's Aunt's actions.

It didn't take a genius to work out why Susan's Aunt had gone to so much trouble, and Harry scowled. "She did it because I'm the Boy Who Supposedly Lived, didn't she?"

"Yes." Susan shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "But she did find something out."

"So they're real?" Harry was willing to forgive his friend for using him like that if that proved to be the case.

"Not exactly. Aunt Amy said that one of Luna's ancestors, a Reginald Snorkack, claimed to have seen a beast that vanished when startled, when he was touring Scandinavia. Because of that, Aunt Amy thinks that Luna may well have heard of Snorkacks because it's a story that has been passed down her family, and

Snorkacks are obviously named after her ancestor." Susan explained in her best 'schoolmarm' voice. "Reginald Snorkack is also the guy who claimed to have discovered Grismacks, tiny flying cats that apparently must have been named after his wife, Elizabeth Grismack, but Aunt Amy's team found nothing to back up that claim, or that they even exist."

"Team?" Harry questioned the plurality of the comment.

"She had a group of people researching it." Susan again looked uncomfortable.

Harry suspected that there was a little more to it than Susan was letting on. "Why an entire team?"

"Because she needs to make sure that anyone you're in contact with is safe." Susan admitted.

"And she didn't think of checking out my relatives?" Harry's question was broadcast in a quiet but acidic voice.

"What do you mean?" Justin knew that Harry didn't get along with his relatives, but he had no inkling of how bad things really had been.

Harry didn't want to discuss his family's treatment of him, but he answered Justin's question honestly. "Let's just say that they didn't exactly treat me well but it doesn't matter now." He then turned to Susan. "And do not repeat that to your Aunt, please."

"I promise I won't." Susan realized that she'd once again put her foot in it. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't think when I wrote to Aunt Amy."

"It's okay." Harry didn't like getting angry with anyone, and he could see that Susan was genuinely upset by her mistake. "At least I know that Luna wasn't just making it up."

"I'm sorry if I put you off her." Susan again apologized.

Harry made sure Susan knew that she hadn't. "You didn't." Harry hesitated, and then revealed something from his childhood. "I know what it's like to be someone everyone considers a freak or a bit strange. I didn't have any friends in school because everyone thought I was a weirdo."

"I don't think that." Justin tried to cheer up his friend.

"That's because you've never met my cousin Dudley." Harry grimaced. "At my school, if you were friends with me, 'the freak', you got beat up, so up until I started here, I didn't have any friends." Harry glanced at Susan, who was growing more and more upset by the minute. "It's okay, Susan. Even though I'm famous here and people stare at me, it's still loads better than junior school."

"Sorry." Susan couldn't help herself and apologized once more.

"It honestly doesn't matter, Susan." Harry assured her. "I've got friends now."

Susan's eye fell on the letter as Harry lifted it up as he spoke. "So what did Luna have to say?"

"Nothing much." It was now Harry's turn to look uncomfortable.

Justin fixed his friend with a steely glance. "You look embarrassed. So what are you hiding?"

Harry knew he'd have to come clean. "I told her about the three headed dog because she seems to know a lot about strange creatures. She mentioned a lot more creatures in her first letter than just Snorkacks and Grismacks."

"Did she know about the dog?" Susan asked, her previous reticence about Luna now vanished.

"I'll tell you when Hermione arrives." Harry glanced over at the door, having expected their friend sooner, Hermione having been given permission to sit with the trio at breakfast.

A few minutes later Hermione came in and sat down. "Sorry I'm late. I was watching George doing his arithmancy homework. It's really interesting."

"But how can you understand it? You've never taken it before." Justin pointed out. "And it's a third year subject."

"I was interested, and George took the time to show me how it worked." Hermione defended her interest.

The Hufflepuff trio shared a restrained grin, which thankfully Hermione, who'd bowed her head and gone red, missed. Ever since Halloween, Hermione had attached herself to George, and it was apparent, even to Harry and Justin, that Hermione had a massive crush on the older boy. Justin grinned at Hermione when she finally looked up again. "He's your hero isn't he?"

"No." Hermione glowered at Justin, her face turning even redder. "It's just nice that someone in Gryffindor will speak to me, let alone risk their life to save me." She suddenly realized something as Harry's face fell. "Not that you didn't try, Harry."

"I was useless." Harry got up. "I'll see you all later."

The group was used to Harry suddenly disappearing whenever he felt threatened or uncomfortable, and Justin watched his friend vanish. "Darn it, he was about to tell us about Luna's letter and hopefully the dog."

"Shall I go after him?" Susan offered, guilt eating at her for making yet another misstep.

Justin shook his head. "Nah. He's still angry with himself that he didn't save Hermione before anyone got hurt."

"He did his best." Hermione defended her absent friend's efforts. "But that was a big troll, and it wasn't Harry's fault that he froze at first."

"I'd have fainted." Justin admitted. "But then again, I don't have the stigma of being the Boy Who Lived following me around."

"Let's go find him." Hermione wasn't going to let Harry mope over his failure to initially act. Getting up, the three children went in search of their friend, Hermione grabbing several slices of toast to eat as she went. She just hoped that they could persuade Harry that despite everyone's expectations of him, he was only a first year, and there had been nothing he could do.

They found Harry in the bleachers watching the Hufflepuff team practicing for their next match against Gryffindor. Susan sat down by Harry. "Harry, you don't have to keep running away from us. We're your friends, even if I am a stupid one, and we'll always support you."

Harry immediately leapt to his friend's defense against herself. "You're not stupid, Susan."

"Yes, I am." Susan was only too well aware that, even though she didn't mean any harm, she often spoke before thinking. "I should never have told you what the wizarding world thinks of the Lovegoods, nor should I have told Aunt Amy that you're writing to Luna. And even worse, I know I upset Hagrid when I was rude about his dog."

"You just didn't think." Harry stared hard at the ground. "Malfoy was right when he said I was useless. I should have done more to help Hermione and George. Instead I just stood there, and they got hurt."

"Harry, you were really brave. Most people wouldn't have even bothered to try and help." Hermione sat down on the other side of Harry. "You saved both me and George."

"I wasn't brave. I was panicking, and did the first thing that came into my head." Harry protested.

Hermione was starting to get annoyed with her friend. "Right. You've moped long enough, Harry Potter. You are a brave, loyal, and good friend, and..."

As Hermione began to lecture Harry, he let his mind wander back to the day of Halloween.

It was the morning of Halloween, and as the group left charms, Hermione slightly ahead of them, she could hear Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom talking. As the boys' conversation continued, Hermione realized that they were talking about her.

Ron's voice was rather loud, also allowing Harry, Justin and Susan to overhear what was being said. "Swish and flick." Ron's voice was mocking. "Trust Granger to bloody well get it right first time." He

mimicked his teacher. "Oh well done, Miss Granger, well done. Bloody know-it-all."

Hermione was used to hurtful words about her achievements; she'd had to listen to similar comments all of her life, but it still upset her that someone from her own house was knocking what she'd done, especially as she'd earned five points for Gryffindor.

As Hermione stopped in dismay, Susan reached her, and put her arm around the girl. And Harry, who although he didn't like confrontations, felt the need to defend his friend, and marched up to Ron, tapping him on the shoulder. "Weasley."

Ron turned around, his face lighting up at the sight of Harry. "Hi mate."

"I'm not your mate." Harry knew from George that Ron had been angling to be introduced to Harry. "How could you be so rude about Hermione? She earned you house points today."

"She was just showing off." Neville joined in with the conversation. "She always does. She never lets anyone have a chance to shine."

While Hermione had expected Ron to run her down, she hadn't expected to hear it from the usually timid Neville. "I didn't do it on purpose. I was just doing what the Professor told us to do."

"Yeah right." Ron's tone indicated that he didn't believe Hermione. "You really think you're special because you do well in classes and your Potter's friend. He's probably only friends with you so that he can copy your work." Ron had often seen Hermione going over Harry's work in the library, and it was pure jealousy that he couldn't get help like that, as well as the fact that Hermione was Harry's friend, and not his, that was driving his words.

Hermione refused to believe that Harry was her friend only for her brains, and she therefore stood up for her Hufflepuff friend. "That's not true."

"Look at Potter." Neville told Hermione. "And tell me it's not true."

Hermione glanced at Harry to see he'd turned red, and thinking it was from shame, she burst into tears and fled before anyone could stop her.

Harry scowled at the two Gryffindors; his red face had been from anger at Ron and Neville, and not embarrassment. "How could you? I'm Hermione's friend because I like her. And you'd better not have ruined my friendship with her because you suck at charms, and she doesn't." Harry then directed his next comment at Ron. "Oh, and don't ever call me your mate again, because I'm not, and nor will I ever be."

Shaking inside, Harry had hated the confrontation but was also proud that he'd managed to defend both himself and his friend. He turned to Justin and Susan, hoping his voice wasn't betraying his inner turmoil. "Let's go find our friend." After giving Ron and Neville several distinctly dark and dirty looks, Justin and Susan followed Harry in the direction that Hermione had taken.

However, none of them could find her, and the trio had to give up when classes began. As dinnertime came around there was still no sign of Hermione, and the trio had to head into the Great Hall, which had been decorated for Halloween. Usually such a display would have delighted the three children but their pleasure was marred by the fact that Hermione was still missing.

Susan's sharp hearing, however, gave the small group a clue as to where Hermione had gotten to. "Harry, I just overheard Parvati say to her sister that Hermione is in the girls' bathroom down by the entrance to the dungeons."

"I can't go into a girls' bathroom." Harry pointed out unnecessarily. "Will you check on her after dinner? I'll put together some food for her."

"I was going to go now." The words had barely left Susan's mouth when Professor Quirrell came running into the Hall. "Troll, in the dungeons." He then collapsed to the ground in an apparent faint.

The entire Hall exploded into pandemonium, which the Headmaster quickly quelled. Teachers were ordered to go with him to hunt down the troll, and prefects were ordered to take the houses to safety; Slytherin being told to head towards the library.

George, like Susan, had overheard Parvati's conversation, and he cornered Ron and Neville. "I heard what you two did to Hermione Granger. And she's got no idea of what's happening because of you pair."

"That's her problem." Ron had no intention of risking his skin for Hermione. "She shouldn't have been such a show off."

"I'm going to find a teacher." George looked around but with Albus' decree that the teachers should follow him, the Hall was now empty; even Quirrell had mysteriously disappeared. "Dammit. Ron, we're going to find her."

"No way." Ron backed away into Fred, who'd come back to see what had happened to his twin.

When he found out what George was planning to do, Fred was pissed with Ron. "George is right, Ronnie. You owe Granger."

"She's a know-it-all." Ron tried to defend himself.

"And she's also a Gryffindor." George pointed out. "What about if it had been Ginny?" George mentioned his younger sister, who was due to start at Hogwarts the next year.

Aware he was cornered, Ron reluctantly agreed to accompany his siblings. "I'll come."

George turned at a tap on his shoulder to find Harry, Susan and Justin standing behind him. "What?"

"We're all coming with you as well." Susan took the lead. "Hermione's our friend."

"Susan, you're not going. It's too dangerous." George had no intention of taking a girl along. "Justin, make sure Susan doesn't follow us."

George then looked around for Ron. But he'd vanished as, despite his words, Ron had made the most of George's distraction to vanish with Neville. So instead, George turned to his twin. "Fred, find us

some teachers, just in case. We're heading towards the girls' bathroom by the dungeons."

"Hey, you can't..." Susan's words ended as Justin grabbed her arm, and she turned angrily on him.

The three boys took advantage of Susan's arguing with Justin to leave without her. All three boys hesitated, but only for a moment, when Percy, the twins' older brother, and a prefect, starting yelling at them. "Where do you think you're going?"

"See you later, Percy. Don't wait up." Fred yelled over his shoulder, and all three boys continued on their way, Percy's yells that he was a prefect and they had to go with him, echoing around them. "I'll be as quick as I can." Fred then turned away from the direction of the dungeons.

"I thought the teachers were in the dungeons." Harry pointed out.

"He knows a shortcut." George picked up the pace. "Come on, the bathroom is just up here."

Harry and George hadn't gotten far when the most awful smell assaulted their nostrils, and Harry began to gag. "What on earth is that?"

"Troll." George had never smelt one before but he knew that they smelt bad, and whatever lay ahead of them most certainly didn't smell of roses.

A scream of fear shifted the boys into action, and they raced towards the noise. On entering the bathroom, Harry's heart felt as if it had stopped as he laid eyes on the big, gray, knobbly, and foul smelling eight foot behemoth in front of him. He'd have closed his eyes but they'd locked with Hermione's, who was standing flattened against the far wall, the troll standing over her, and now he found he couldn't look away.

George barked out an urgent direction. "Hermione, get out of the way."

Hermione neither moved nor acknowledged George in any way, terror robbing her of her motor skills. George aimed his wand at the

troll. "Stupefy." Nothing happened, the spell bouncing off the troll. The troll did, however, turn around and raise its club, as if it could reach George from eight feet away.

George knew by now that Hermione wasn't moving, and he started to head towards her, only for the club to come swinging towards him. "Harry, distract it." George yelled out as he dodged the large club. Harry, like Hermione, didn't move, and the troll took a swipe at George again. As the club impacted a toilet door, sending thousands of splinters into the air and narrowly missing George, Hermione found her voice again, and screamed in fear.

Unfortunately Hermione's scream drew the troll's attention back to her, and it swung the club at her. Aware that Hermione couldn't move, George did the only thing he could think of at that moment, and dove in front of Hermione, placing himself in the club's path. George yelled out in pain when the club impacted his body, breaking several of his ribs, and sending him smashing into Hermione. And then George fell silent as did Hermione, the force behind the club driving them both into the wall; the dual soft crunches telling Harry that the pair had hit their heads.

As everything went silent, Harry stood there in fear and panic as the troll raised its club again, intending to ensure that its victims were truly dead. Harry could feel his heart rate increasing, and he glanced hopefully at the door but even though he could hear voices getting closer, the owners of them obviously weren't going to make it in time. Not knowing what else to do, Harry finally reacted and pulled out his wand. His mind almost blank, Harry opened his mouth and screamed out the first spell that came to him, fear and adrenalin pushing far more power into the spell than would normally be the case. "Accio troll."

The group of teachers, who'd been alerted by Fred, ran up to the door just in time to see a massive troll flying through the air towards the wall. All of them winced as the troll smashed into the wall, a loud crack signifying that it had smacked its head quite sharply. Harry, who'd ducked when he realized that the troll was going to fly into him, moved quickly out of the way as the troll fell forward. Only then did he turn to face the teachers, Minerva breaking free from the group to check that Harry was in one piece. "Are you alright?"

"F..fine." Harry stammered the word out. "But Hermione and George..." Harry didn't finish his sentence, instead pointing to the pair that no-one had really taken any notice of until then, their attention solely on Harry and the troll.

Minerva, Severus and Albus moved forward, and a short time later, the injured children were safely ensconced in the hospital wing, and the troll had been dealt with.

Present Time

Hermione, who'd now finished lecturing Harry, took Harry's hand. "It doesn't matter if you panicked or not. What matters is that you saved us. The teachers would have been too late."

Sneakily watching Hufflepuff's practice session from under the bleachers, two boys had been listening to the conversation, but both remained silent as Harry finally acknowledged the truth. They continued to listen as the subjects of Luna Lovegood and a three headed dog were brought up. According to Luna, it turned out that the dog was known as a Cerberus. The two boys filed this information away, and only once Harry and his three friends had left, did the boys dare to say anything.

Neville was frowning. "I thought Potter was a real hero but he's just a fraud."

Ron had to be a little kinder, especially as George and Fred had kept quiet about Ron's involvement in the incident, and had saved him from a roasting from his parents, who'd been called to the school when George was in the infirmary. "Yeah but Potter still saved George's life."

Both boys had conveniently forgotten that it was their fault that George had had to risk his life in the first place, as Neville went on. "He got lucky. I'm sure we could have done it."

"Yeah, we could." Ron wasn't so sure but he'd never admit that to Neville, and he hurriedly changed the subject to that of the Cerberus. "What do you suppose this dog is guarding?"

"I have no idea." Neville shook his head as he responded. "And why would it be guarding something here? Why not just put it in Gringotts?"

"I dunno." Ron replied. "Bill always says that Gringotts is practically impossible to break into."

Ron's words stirred something in Neville's mind. Everyone considered Neville stupid because he wasn't magically talented but that was far from the case, as he proved now. "Do you think it's guarding whatever supposedly wasn't taken from Gringotts in that break-in; you know, the one that happened just before school started?"

"Of course. Hogwarts is the next safest place in the world, and the Headmaster is here." Ron clapped Neville on the back. "So we've just got to find out what that dog thing is guarding, and we'll be able to prove to that know-it-all that she isn't the cleverest person in our year."

Neville's face became alight with pleasure. "And I can show everyone what it's like to be really brave. Not like Potter."

Happy with themselves and their plan, the two boys set off for the library.

Next Chapter: Harry's hope for anonymity fades even more as he has yet another run-in with Malfoy but this time it has unexpected results.

Chapter 8: A Snitch in the Hand

After the game between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor ended, Harry and his friends headed up from the quidditch pitch, three of them feeling a little despondent. Only Hermione was smiling, not because Gryffindor had won but because George had played well. In fact, not being a fan of quidditch, George had been the only reason Hermione had gone to watch the match, not that she would have admitted that to anyone. Seeing how downcast the trio was, Hermione tried to make them feel better. "I'm sorry that Hufflepuff lost. They did try hard."

"Thanks but I know you're glad that your team won." Susan believed quite wrongly that Hermione was just being polite.

Justin also believed the same but directed his ire elsewhere. "If only the teachers hadn't changed the playing order this year, I'm sure we'd have done much better against Ravenclaw." Usually Hufflepuff played Ravenclaw first, but a run of injuries in the Ravenclaw team during practice had forced an early change, leaving Hufflepuff to play Ravenclaw in mid-February. And even though he was a Muggleborn, Justin had taken to the game like a duck to water, and had pretty much memorized everything about it, including the playing order.

"At least your team will have a chance to practice before they face Ravenclaw." Hermione sensibly pointed out.

"I suppose you're right." Harry wasn't quite as into quidditch as Justin, but even he had hoped his house's team would have done better.

A loud snort reached the ears of the group. "They could practice until the end of the time, and they'd still lose, Potter. Summerby can't seek to save his life."

Aware that Draco was deliberately trying to bait him, Harry sighed as he turned around to face his nemesis. "Just go away, Malfoy."

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Potter?" Draco smirked, knowing it would irritate Harry, and denigrated Gregory Summerby again. "And the truth is that Hufflepuff's seeker sucks."

Unlike Harry, Justin simply couldn't ignore Draco, and before Harry could respond, snapped out an irate rejoinder. "It's not as if you could do any better."

"You don't think so?" Draco challenged Justin's statement.

"No." Justin mockingly shook his head. "You're all mouth, Malfoy."

"No, I'm not." Draco wasn't exactly lying. Growing up he'd practiced flying quite a bit in the grounds of Malfoy Manor. "Because unlike you, I can actually fly well enough to catch a snitch, which is more than can be said for Summerby." Due to a back injury, Hufflepuff's seeker, Greg Summerby had had to be carried off the pitch, and the snitch had been caught by Gryffindor's usually inept seeker before Hufflepuff could field their reserve, Cedric Diggory.

Justin defended his house's seeker. "Greg would have won the match for us if he hadn't hurt himself."

"Just face the truth, loser." Draco was flanked by his laughing friends as he started to walk off. "Summerby is a shit seeker. Any neither he, nor anyone else in your house, will ever be able to catch a snitch."

Draco had barely taken more than ten steps when Susan blurted out a comeback. "I bet that Harry could catch a snitch." Unfortunately Susan had no real idea of Harry's capabilities, since she was basing her claim solely on the fact that she had decided that Harry looked at home on a broomstick, and would eventually be an excellent flier.

Harry thought differently from Susan. Bad weather had resulted in the cancellation of more than one of their flying lessons that year, meaning that Harry had only had four lessons. So, not wanting Draco to overhear him, he hissed quietly at Susan from the corner of his mouth. "You know I couldn't. I've hardly had any lessons."

Unfortunately Draco hadn't walked far enough away, and caught Harry's aside. "See, even he knows he's crap. I mean he's barely even gotten off the ground."

"Get stuffed." Justin butted in before Susan could defend Harry. "Just because Harry doesn't show off like some, doesn't mean that he can't fly or catch a snitch."

"Prove it." Draco demanded as he walked back towards the group.

Fed up with the Slytherin's constant whining and bragging, Justin wasn't going to let this one go. "We will."

Aware it would have something to do with him if Justin got his way, Harry went to break into the discussion to tell the boys to count him out, only for Severus Snape, who literally seemed to materialize out of nowhere, to interrupt the proceedings. "What's going on?"

Draco turned to his head of house. "Potter was just claiming to be a better flier than me."

"No, he w... Ouch!" Hermione's protest ended with a bark of pain as Harry stepped on her foot to make her shut up. He didn't want Snape turning his attention on Hermione, who had already said that the potions master derided her in class.

Harry's abrupt manner of dealing with Hermione worked, Severus scowling at Harry instead. "So we're showing off again, are we, Potter?"

"No, Professor." Harry denied it. "We were just having a discussion about Hufflepuff's seeker."

"Mr. Malfoy?" Severus' tone more or less inferred that he didn't believe Harry.

"Potter didn't think I'd be any good as a seeker, Sir." Addressing his head of house in a deferential tone, Draco knew he was stirring things up. "And he and his friends seemed to think that Potter would be a better flier as well."

Severus didn't care whether this was the truth or not, holding up his hand as both Susan and Justin went to protest. "In that case I think we should show Potter just how competent you are on a broom. At the same time we can find out exactly how good of a flier Potter really is."

"I don't think I'm any good, Professor." Harry hurriedly refuted his level of skill, afraid of where this was going to lead.

Severus ignored Harry's repudiation. "On Sunday morning you and Mr. Malfoy will both present yourselves at the quidditch pitch at 9a.m." After issuing his decree, Severus began to walk off, only to stop and make one final comment. "And do bring a broom." After flashing Harry a smirk, Draco followed in his teacher's footsteps.

Harry had hoped to be able to get some practice in before the threatened Sunday morning. But it seemed to Harry that Snape had deliberately taken great delight in piling ever more homework onto him and his classmates, which meant that Harry's spare time had been eaten up in trying to get the work completed on time. Therefore when Sunday morning rolled round, Harry had barely even looked at a broomstick, let alone flew on one, and was now sitting at the breakfast table, his stomach churning. "I can't do this."

"You have to." Hermione chided him, as she joined her friends at the Hufflepuff table for breakfast. "Everyone wants to see you beat Malfoy."

"Just how many people are going to watch me make an idiot of myself?" Unbeknown to him, Harry's face reflected the terror and worry he was feeling.

Having spent the last half an hour in the common room trying to calm Harry down, Susan glared at Hermione when she realized that all of her efforts had now gone to waste. "To think it's usually me who puts my foot in it!"

Hermione had the good grace to go red. "Sorry, I thought he knew."

"Well, he didn't, and your telling him has only made things worse." After berating her friend for her insensitivity, Susan turned to Harry and began to treat her worried friend exactly as her Aunt often dealt with her when she was upset. "Don't worry about who will be watching, Harry. I know you're going to do well." Susan piled some bacon and sausage onto Harry's plate. "Right now, you need to try and eat something. You'll feel better if you do."

Harry wasn't going to let Susan distract him. "How many people, Susan?"

Aware that Susan wouldn't tell Harry the truth, and believing that Harry should be forewarned now that Hermione had spilled the

beans, Justin offered up the information instead. "Pretty much the whole school. And apparently some people are even taking bets on you winning." Justin sensibly refrained from telling Harry that he himself had placed a five galleon bet on Harry to win with Eric Lestrade, a fifth year Ravenclaw and the school's underground bookie. And it was Lestrade who had somehow discovered that Snape's intention was to hold a competition between the two boys, and he'd subsequently leaked this information to the rest of the school, resulting in a flurry of betting.

It was probably a good thing that Harry knew nothing about the illegal betting. He was already full of anxiety, and Justin's announcement about the whole school witnessing the showdown had made Harry want to run and hide. He didn't do that though. Instead he groaned, and dropped his head onto the table. "I want to die."

"No, you don't." Hermione remarked firmly, and, taking a leaf out of Susan's book, she also tried to persuade Harry to partake of the food in front of him. "Now eat up. Malfoy is."

Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table where it appeared that Draco wasn't suffering from the same nerves Harry was. As Harry watched him, the Slytherin speared a slice of bacon from a somewhat overflowing breakfast plate. "But he can fly."

"So can you." Having brought *Hogwarts: A History* to breakfast with her, Hermione opened up the book at a page where a leather bookmark was poking out at the top, and she then pointed to a moving photo. "Look at this, Harry."

Harry glanced across at the page Hermione wanted him to see. Due to his overabundance of homework, the page was in a section of the book that Harry hadn't yet reached in his reading, and he read aloud the caption below the photo that Hermione's finger was resting on. "James Potter, Chaser and Captain, Gryffindor – Winners of the House Cup 1977 and 1978."

Harry's attention was now entirely focused the photo, which depicted a bespectacled young man who wore what could only be described as a cocky grin similar to one that Harry had often seen Draco displaying. Despite that, Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from the photo as the young man in it repeatedly threw a snitch into the air

and then reached out to grab it, his fingers curling around it, and dragging it back towards him just as it appeared that he'd lose it. His heart pounding, Harry finally looked up at Hermione. "That's my Dad, isn't it?"

"I think so. So you see, Harry, flying is in your blood, and..." Hermione's intended pep talk ended abruptly when she spotted tears in Harry's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's just that I've never seen a picture of my Dad before." Harry couldn't stop the tear that ran down his cheek.

A tear that Draco, who'd gotten up to taunt Harry about their impending match, noticed. "Already crying about losing, Potter?"

Hermione immediately slammed the book shut, not wanting Draco to see what had really upset Harry. "Get lost, Malfoy."

Susan also reiterated Hermione's comment, making Draco laugh, and mock Harry once more. "Girls defending you again, Potter? They're not going to be able to help you when you're on that crappy broom, and I'm winning." Draco nodded towards the borrowed Cleansweep Seven that was sitting at Harry's side; Draco was using a Nimbus 2000 that he'd negotiated to borrow from one of the Slytherin chasers.

"I won't need the girls to defend me, Malfoy, and this broom isn't crappy. It's brilliant, and I'm going to use it to grind you into the dirt." Furious that Draco had ruined a precious moment in his life, Harry got to his feet, grabbed the broomstick, and stormed off, leaving Draco standing openmouthed with shock that Harry had acted so aggressively towards him, and the Great Hall all of a twitter at Harry's uncharacteristic behavior.

By the time 9am arrived, Harry's anger had dissipated. Now nerves had taken anger's place, and Harry was shaking as he stood on the quidditch pitch, the borrowed broom clutched tightly in his right hand, and his heart pounding so loudly that he was sure everyone could hear it. And by everyone, he meant everyone, for it appeared that the entire school, including the teachers, had come to view the play-off between the two boys. Finding the crowd overwhelming, Harry tried not to look around too much but when his eyes fell upon his

guardian, who was sitting next to the Headmaster in the teachers' box, he managed to dredge up a tiny smile for her.

After giving Harry a very brief smile in return, Minerva leant closer to Albus, keeping her voice low so that it didn't carry to the other teachers around them. "If Harry is humiliated, I'll never forgive you." Minerva had been furious when she'd learnt what Severus had done, since despite the fact that she only saw Harry for lessons and every Wednesday evening for a few hours, she had become quite protective of the young boy. Her anger had been exacerbated when Albus had overruled her objections, allowing the competition to continue, and she'd barely spoken a word to him all week.

Albus had weathered the storm though, aware that his friend and colleague would eventually capitulate and speak to him. "I'm quite sure that Harry will do the Potter name proud." Like Hermione, Albus believed that the young boy was up to the challenge.

Minerva didn't get a chance to respond because Severus chose that moment to stroll onto the pitch, and without preamble he began to explain the challenge. "I have seven snitches. The winner of this challenge, and therefore the superior flier, is the person who catches the most snitches."

Anything else that Severus might have said went over Harry's head because Harry had noticed other students joining them. And Harry swallowed hard when he realized that the new arrivals represented the beaters from the four houses, and, just as they would in a proper game of quidditch, Harry had a horrible feeling that he and Draco would be the targets. As the whistle blew and Harry started to rise into the air, he discovered that he wasn't wrong about his suspicions when almost immediately a bludger flew towards him, forcing Harry back down towards the ground. "Dammit."

Draco wasn't such an easy target, since the moment the whistle had blown, the Slytherin had literally shot into the air, and out of immediate danger. Once Draco was sure that he was comfortably situated, he began to fly around Harry, sneering loudly at him. "You suck, Potter."

"Just go away, Malfoy." Trying to regain the ground the bludger had forced him to yield, Harry had been clinging tightly to the broomstick

when he'd suddenly wobbled precariously, and because of this distraction, Harry's riposte had held little force.

It wouldn't have mattered if it had. Draco had no intention of giving up on his Harry baiting, and he laughed when he noticed how white Harry's knuckles were. "Scared you're going to fall off, Potter?"

"You wish." Harry flung the words at him, and, even though he was convinced he was going to fall off the broomstick and die, he defiantly matched Draco when the boy flew ever higher.

"You're right, I do." Draco's reply left Harry in no doubt how the Slytherin felt about him.

Harry, however, didn't bother to respond to Draco; all of his concentration was focused on just staying on the broomstick, particularly as the people on the ground were growing smaller and smaller as he got higher and higher. "I can do this. I can do this."

"In your dreams, Potter." Draco mocked. "You suck at flying, and I bet your father is rolling over in his grave."

Harry knew then that despite Hermione's move to slam shut the book, Draco had obviously seen what had upset Harry at breakfast. And now, upset by the truth behind Draco's words, Harry's voice quavered as he uttered a quiet entreaty. "Just leave me alone."

Harry's eyes were suspiciously watery so Draco ignored Harry's demand. "Boo hoo. Potter's going to cry again because he's not as good as his dead Daddy."

Draco's teasing had the opposite effect to the one he'd hoped for. Instead of bursting into tears, Harry's anger suddenly returned in full force, and he pushed back his shoulders, and did something he rarely did, he swore. "Fuck you, Malfoy."

Stunned at Harry's language, Draco didn't respond straightaway, and Harry couldn't help the small shiver of pleasure that trickled through him at the look on Draco's face. After getting no immediate comeback, Harry boldly challenged Draco. "Keep up if you can."

Then, even though he had no idea if he'd fall off, or even if he was about to do the right thing, Harry bent low over his broomstick, just as he'd seen members of the Hufflepuff team do during practice. When the broomstick accelerated away from the still surprised Slytherin, Harry found himself repeating his earlier words. "I can do this. I can do this." Only this time, Harry's words weren't nervous; they were forceful and full of self-conviction.

With Harry pulling away from him, Draco was unable to think of a retort he could use to mock Harry, and he therefore chose not to pursue his opponent. Also several bludgers were now coming directly for him, courtesy of the Weasley twins, and Draco had to dodge them to avoid being knocked from his broomstick. After righting himself, Draco spotted a glint of gold below where Harry was currently flying, and headed back down towards it.

Harry, who'd also spotted the snitch, didn't even attempt to go after it, as for the first time he could ever remember, he realized that he actually felt at peace. And, with the sound of the wind in his ears and the cold winter sun in his eyes, Harry realized that Hermione had been right, flying was in his blood. Ignoring his mission, Harry flew aimlessly in circles, his only real effort was in avoiding stray bludgers. And he had a smile on his face as he relished a world that at that moment, apart from the odd errant missile, consisted of only him, his broomstick, and the sky.

Harry's solitude was disturbed when a whirring noise startled him, and he glanced to his left to see what was making the strange sound. He soon discovered the culprit; a gold snitch, its little wings beating furiously to keep itself aloft, was hovering less than a foot away from him. Instinct took over, and, just as he'd seen his father doing in the photo, Harry snaked out his hand far quicker than he could have imagined possible, and attempted to end the snitch's journey. The instant his fingers closed securely around the small, cold object a futile struggle began, but it was soon over, and as it powered down, the snitch was deposited in Harry's pocket.

Zippering up his pocket, groans of disappointment reached Harry's ears. However, it was merely microseconds later before the groans were obliterated by the sounds of cheering. Harry presumed that Draco must have caught the glinting object they'd both spotted before Harry had become lost in the sensations of his first real flight. It was then that Harry's detachment vanished as he realized that this

contest wasn't just about him; it was about his friends and his house, and he couldn't let them down by allowing Draco to win. He again uttered his mantra for that morning. "I can do this."

And with his mindset now altered, Harry began to actively seek out the remaining snitches, his change of heart being rewarded when, after just a few minutes, Harry spotted a snitch less than twenty feet below him. Then it vanished from sight as it disappeared into the low lying cloud that hid the crowd from Harry's sight, and him from them. He'd not hidden well enough though, because as he aimed his broom downwards, Harry had to dart between two bludgers that had suddenly broken through the cloud cover, before following his prey into those very same clouds. Wet and shivering, Harry still grinned happily when, in spite of the chilly conditions and being unable to see inside the dense clouds, Harry's sharp hearing caught the sound of fluttering. Just as the clouds began to thin, Harry's fingers closed around yet another target, and he pocketed his second snitch.

Moments later he left the clouds behind, and Harry finally came back into the view of the general populace. And they, currently having no idea about Harry's treasures, groaned once more when Draco took yet another snitch. However, Draco's vanity was about to be his downfall as, with Slytherin's cheers ringing in his ears, Draco spotted Harry and couldn't resist showing off. He lifted the newly captured snitch aloft, Slytherin's cheers growing louder as he did so, and, while Draco lapped up the admiration his house was showering upon him, Harry began scanning the area for more snitches.

Irritated by Draco's egotism, Harry couldn't help but smirk to himself when he noticed that there was yet another snitch fluttering less than five feet behind his adversary that Draco hadn't spotted, the cheers of Slytherin drowning out the sound of the snitch's wings. Determined to beat his snotty adversary, Harry wasn't about to let such an opportunity go to waste, and he bent low over his broomstick to pick up speed, heading directly for Draco and his quarry.

"Malfoy." One of the Slytherin beaters, whose name Harry didn't know, screamed anxiously at Draco but it was too late. Just as Draco turned to see why Henry Bole had yelled out his name and was gesturing behind him, Harry shot by the would-be seeker, reaching out to successfully pluck his target from the air. The crowd went wild when they realized that Harry wasn't out of the game yet.

Harry, however, had little time to enjoy his own triumph since another snitch had appeared, and once again the chase was on. Slightly at a disadvantage, having shot past Draco in gaining his third snitch, Harry had to brake sharply before turning and starting to head for the snitch that would seal his victory. Unfortunately, Harry's journey was about to be impeded by a bludger that an angry Bole had sent at him; a bludger Harry couldn't avoid if he wanted to reach the snitch in time to stop Draco from claiming the prize. And Harry was determined that no matter what, this snitch was going to be his.

Draco laughed out loud in triumph when Harry's single-mindedness was rewarded by the bludger smacking into Harry's leg just before Harry reached the snitch. And Draco's delight burgeoned even more when he realized that not only had the bludger injured Harry's leg, but it had also caused Harry to lose his grip on his broomstick. Uncaring about his opponent's predicament, Draco didn't make any attempt to help when Harry began to thrash his arms in the air as he desperately tried to remain upright. It was a battle that Harry couldn't win, and shortly thereafter Harry parted company with his ride. Believing that the snitch was now his, Draco gleefully headed towards it but his mirth was to be cut short. Almost unbelievably, at exactly the same time that Harry fell from his broomstick, the small prey changed direction and began heading, together with Harry, down towards the ground. Cursing loudly, Draco immediately bent low over his broomstick, and began to pursue the two of them.

Having spotted the snitch's change of direction as he slipped off his broomstick, Harry was almost oblivious about his impending demise as he tried to catch the winged ball that was keeping pace with him. And if the wind hadn't been rushing by his ears, Harry would have heard Draco give a scream of rage as the snitch disappeared from view and into Harry's hand. It was only then that the crowds' screams registered fully in Harry's mind, and he realized that he was about to die. However, Harry's imminent death was delayed when his downward spiral was stopped by the owners of two broomsticks placing themselves in Harry's path, the momentum of Harry hitting the broomsticks almost forcing the three boys into the ground.

As Harry lay panting across their broomsticks with two arms wrapped around him to ensure that he wouldn't slip off, the Weasley twins grinned at him and spoke together. "Got a death wish, Harry?"

Even though the thought 'I'm going to die' had shot through Harry's mind just after grabbing the snitch, it was only then that the reality of what could have happened to him finally hit Harry. And with the adrenalin of trying to reach the snitch long gone, Harry suddenly found he couldn't speak. The twins understood only too well how this felt, having had a few close calls themselves, and they refrained from teasing Harry as they maneuvered their brooms to the ground, which was now only ten feet or so below them.

Severus made his way over to the three boys the moment they landed, and addressed Harry, his voice oily and full of palpable gratification. "Are you forfeiting the match, Potter?"

With the twins help, Harry stood unsteadily, his injured leg making it difficult, and he faced his most hated professor, his voice returning as he slid his hand into his pocket to check on his bounty. "No, Professor."

"Then I suggest you get back on your broom, wherever it is." Sniggers accompanied Severus' comment, for the broomstick in question was currently still in the air, making lazy circles under its own power as it slowly descended. "Otherwise you've lost the contest."

"I don't need to get back on it, Professor." Harry pulled out the three snitches from his pocket one by one, adding them to the one still tightly grasped in his hand. "I have four snitches."

Severus' look of pleasure vanished. "Impossible."

"Let me see those snitches, Mr. Potter." Mara Hooch, who'd agreed to act as an impartial referee, took the now dormant snitches from Harry, and checked them over. Before the match, she'd marked them with an ornate 'MH' so that no cheating could occur. After finishing her inspection, Mara savored a very pleasurable moment when she realized that Harry had indeed beaten Draco. Wanting to share that feeling with the rest of the crowd, Mara touched her throat and uttered a spell to enhance the volume of her voice. "Harry Potter wins."

Screams of delight roared through the quidditch stands as three houses expressed their delight. Draco ignored their happiness as he

landed beside Harry. "He must have cheated. There's no way he could have beaten me. I demand a rematch."

"There will be no rematch, Mr. Malfoy." Mara stood firm. "Mr. Potter won fairly. Now I suggest you shake hands with him."

Draco, however, chose to storm off, and Mara muttered something about bad sportsmanship under her breath. Feeling on top of the world, Harry didn't care about Malfoy, and was about to say something to his teacher to that effect when Susan flung herself at him, almost bowling him over. "You were wonderful, Harry."

Harry's newly discovered confidence instantly deflated. Unlike flying, affectionate gestures didn't come naturally to Harry, mostly because he had no memory of ever being hugged before. He therefore stiffly wrapped his arms around Susan, before quickly letting go. "I just did my best."

"That's very modest, Harry." Pomona Sprout, who'd hurried to join the victor, was beaming from ear to ear with pride. "You were quite outstanding. You caught four snitches in less than thirty minutes, and your last capture was going above and beyond the call of duty. Your father would have been proud."

After Draco's spiteful reference to his father, Pomona's praise almost undid Harry, and he started to tear up again, dropping his head so that no-one could see the tears that he was fighting to hold back. "Thanks, Professor."

Fred, who'd remained at Harry's side, unwittingly helped Harry out when he changed the flow of the conversation with a question. "So when will Slytherin be facing you on the quidditch pitch, Harry?"

George also wanted to know the answer to that. "Yeah, Harry, when?"

Even though Harry had adored the flying, and had been caught up in the thrill of the chase, he didn't really want anything to do with quidditch. And now that he'd had a moment to recover himself, Harry's voice was clear of any tears as he reminded the twins of the school rules, before they got any wild ideas about Harry's future. "I'm too young."

However, it was already too late for Harry. Fred's question had made a light bulb go off in Pomona's head, and she disappeared from the group. Harry didn't notice since he was now being engulfed by his housemates all wanting to congratulate him, and asking the same sort of questions as Fred had. Harry was still fending off questions when, twenty minutes after she'd left, Pomona returned, and had to try and push her way through the crowd to reach Harry. Raising her voice a little, Pomona made a polite but firm demand. "Can I have a little room, please?"

The crowd immediately parted, granting Pomona access to Harry. "I have good news for you, Harry."

Harry could see that whatever the news was, it had made his teacher very happy. "What is it?"

Pomona's face was full of pride and pleasure as she made her announcement. "Harry, I've just spoken to the Headmaster, and he's agreed to allow you to play for Hufflepuff in the seeker's position for the rest of this year."

"But what about Greg Summerby?" Harry protested quickly, his brain trying to come up with an excuse as to why he couldn't take the position. "And what about Cedric Diggory? He's the reserve seeker."

"He is." Pomona acknowledged Harry's comment about Cedric. "But since we have no-one else, we need Cedric to remain as the reserve for the chasers." When Pomona had told Cedric what she was going to do, he'd been a little disappointed not to be offered the seeker's position but he was also aware that Harry appeared to be a better seeker than he was, and he'd been promised a shot at the seeker's position when the new school year began.

"And Greg Summerby?" Harry again reminded Pomona of the current seeker.

"Gregory will remain on the team as Captain and reserve seeker." Because of the injuries he'd sustained to his back in his last match, Greg Summerby was glad to shed the full-time seeker position, and had quickly agreed to stand down, especially when Pomona had asked him to remain as Captain.

Harry, however, continued to argue. "But I can't just take his place."

Greg, who as Captain had accompanied Pomona to speak to Harry, placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Yes, you can. You're good, Harry, really good. And I want you on the team."

"But, but, but..." Harry was now lost for words, and he blurted out the first thing that came into his head. "But I don't know what to do."

"First of all, I think you should send Malfoy a thank you card." George laughed nastily, the volume of his voice growing louder when he spotted several first year Slytherins going by.

Fred's face was a mirror of his twin's as was the volume of his voice. "Yeah. Cause if it wasn't for Malfoy, this wouldn't have happened." He turned to face Pomona Sprout, and his voice became more respectful. "Professor, when was the last time a first year made a house team?"

Pomona had to own up to her ignorance. "I'm afraid I don't know."

"I do." Hermione piped up, having researched quidditch since she'd developed a crush on George so that she could join in with conversations about the game. "It was more than a century ago."

"Hear that, Harry?" Fred nudged the dark-haired boy. "So now you're not only famous for beating You-Know-Who but..."

George butted in and finished Fred's sentence. "... you're also going to be famous for being the only first year to make a house team in over a hundred years."

"And won't it just go to his already swollen head?" Looming over the crowd, Snape's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Now I think this little party should be disbanded. Potter should be applying himself to his schoolwork, not pandering to his fan club."

Not one to usually rock the boat, Pomona turned a disgruntled eye on Snape, and defended one of her favorite students. "Harry applies himself well as he's just proven today!" Having made her point, Pomona then turned her back on her colleague, and smiled brightly at the small crowd. "But perhaps it is time to let Harry catch his

breath, and maybe head towards the hospital wing so that we can have that leg taken care of."

Having been slighted by his colleague, Severus walked off in disgust, heading back towards the school. Most of the crowd then began to follow him, not because of Severus' high-handed demand, but because a teacher they all liked had pointed out that Harry needed medical attention. Soon it was just Harry, his friends, Greg Summerby, and his teacher, and they too also began to head back, only more slowly.

As he limped towards the castle, Justin supporting him on his injured side, Harry questioned his teacher about her decision. "Do you really want me to play seeker for Hufflepuff, Professor?"

"Don't you want to represent your house team, Harry?" Pomona asked gently, thinking that Harry was just being modest.

"Um, yeah." Under the circumstances, Harry didn't know what else to say.

Greg did. "In that case, practice is at six o'clock on Tuesday. Do you have your own broom?"

"No." Harry had never imagined he'd need one, to say nothing of the rules preventing a first year from bringing a broomstick to school.

"I'll look through the school brooms then to try and find you a decent one." Gregory informed him, before going further. "And one more thing, just so you know, all positions are granted on a year by year basis, so you'll have to try out again at the start of your second year. But in the meantime, welcome to the team, Harry."

"Thanks." Still desirous of merging into the background, Harry decided that he wouldn't try out next year, but right then he had little other choice except to accept the position. Having reached the door to the school, Harry shook hands with Greg, who then departed. And after noticing Roger Banks, the second year who'd loaned the broomstick Harry had used, standing behind him, Harry also thanked him. "Thank you for letting me use your broom."

"Anytime." Roger walked off, reverently cradling the broomstick that had been recovered by one of the Hufflepuff beaters before it could

fly into the Whomping Willow, a particularly malevolent tree that sat close to the quidditch pitch.

"You do know that he'll probably never clean that broom again, don't you?" Susan teased Harry as they headed up the stairs and onto the first floor. "It'll be the broom that helped the Boy Who Lived become the youngest seeker in a century."

"Just great." Harry was no more enamored of knowing that than he was of becoming Hufflepuff's seeker. When they finally reached the hospital wing, Harry couldn't help but feel relieved. The pain in his leg had been worsening with every step he took. "Thank goodness we're here."

On spotting Madam Pomfrey bearing down on them, Justin quickly rounded up the group that had accompanied Harry. "We'd better go."

As the group hurried out, Harry called out to his friends. "See you later." He then gratefully consigned himself to Madam Pomfrey's care.

Next Chapter: Neville encounters an unusual mirror; Harry meets up with a friend in Diagon Alley; A dragon egg goes missing.

Chapter 9: Of Dogs and Dragons

Apart from Draco's housemates turning his hair black and yellow for a few days as a punishment for losing to Harry, things soon settled down after the excitement surrounding Harry's initial induction into the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. For Harry, the only difference in his life was the fact that he now had to juggle schoolwork and quidditch practice, which took place three times a week. Harry was therefore grateful for Hermione's help in looking over whatever homework he'd done, the pair usually meeting in the library an hour before dinner. And it was in the library, almost two weeks after Harry's victory over Draco, where Ron and Neville sat watching Harry and Hermione going over their defense homework together, Harry still wearing his quidditch garb as he'd come straight from practice.

Neville scowled at the sight. "It isn't fair. Just because he managed to catch some little balls with wings, he gets to be in his house team, and I've heard that he'll be allowed to bring a broom to school if he wants to. If he can, then we all should be able to do the same."

Ron couldn't understand why Neville was so upset about the broomstick waiver, especially since Neville's own flying skills left a lot to be desired, but being a loyal friend Ron said nothing about it. "At least he beat Malfoy."

"Probably set the whole thing up with him." Neville's voice was full of bitterness.

"I don't think so." Ron defended Harry, not because he liked him but because he hated Draco. "You saw how angry Malfoy was when he stormed past us."

"I suppose." Neville wasn't eager to relinquish the idea that Harry had done something underhand, but if he didn't want to get into trouble the next day, Neville knew he had focus on finishing the essay he'd only partially written for potions rather than bitching about Harry. "I guess we should start on our homework." Grumbling and tugging out his parchment, Ron agreed, and Neville began to search through his book bag for his own essay, only to come up empty-handed. "Shite. I left it in the dormitory. I'll be back shortly."

Leaving Ron behind to work on his barely started essay, Neville set off for Gryffindor tower, tossing his remembrall up and down in his

hand. "Stupid thing. Doesn't even work." As he threw it higher into the air, a glint of gold from a slightly open door caught his eye, and, distracted, Neville almost dropped the remembrall before safely catching it and placing it in his pocket. About to continue walking by, Neville didn't know why but something changed his mind, and he decided to find out what had caught his attention. After looking up and down the corridor and spotting no-one, Neville pushed open the door to the room that the glint had come from, and stepped inside.

What he found wasn't particularly exciting. The only thing inside of the room, situated in the very center of it, was a large ornate mirror that stood on clawed feet. Disappointed, Neville decided to leave but instead found himself walking towards the mirror. And on getting closer, Neville could see writing around the frame. His curiosity aroused again, Neville walked right up to the mirror, and he read aloud the words that surrounded the mirror's glass interior. "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

Neville's voice echoed around the room making him start at the astoundingly loud sound. And it was at that moment that Neville caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, forcing an involuntary expletive from his lips. "Merlin!"

His heart pounding in his chest, Neville reached out to touch the image that had caused his outburst. His movement was somewhat hesitant, almost as if the mirror wouldn't feel as he expected. But it did, cold and unyielding under his fingers, and he spoke almost unthinkingly to himself as his fingers brushed against the hard glass. "How can I be seeing this?"

As he finished speaking, a scraping sound reached Neville's ears, and he jumped nervously again, his hand falling away from the mirror. However, when he looked around to see who or what had made the noise, he discovered that there was no-one to be seen. Deciding he was imagining things, Neville returned his attention back to the mirror, and he scratched his head as he tried to figure out what it was he was seeing. When he was unable to work it out, Neville spoke cautiously to the image in the mirror. "I know you aren't really me." Saying nothing, Neville's doppelganger merely stared back at him, a lightning bolt scar evident on his forehead.

As Neville continued to stare, he gasped out loud when he saw his parents and Gran walk into view inside the mirror. After reflexively

glancing behind him and finding no-one, Neville didn't understand how they could be reflected in the glass. Then again he couldn't understand how he could be seeing himself with Harry's famous scar. But Neville's ponderings came to an end and his chest started to tighten, when his family in the mirror began smiling at his doppelganger, his Gran beaming widely at the boy who wasn't really him. And the constriction only worsened when his Gran drew the fake Neville into her arms, a proud look adorning her face. It wasn't fair. Neville had wanted to be treated like that all of his life. And now it seemed as though the imposter inside the mirror knew this, and that he was tormenting Neville with what he wanted, but couldn't have.

Tearing his gaze away from the images in the mirror, Neville re-read the words surrounding the glass of the mirror. It clicked then what the writing was; it was mirror writing. Neville therefore hoped that if he began to read from the end of the phrase rather than from the beginning, he might be able to make sense of the garbled words, and the confusing images that he was seeing. So he again spoke aloud as he reversed the order of the words, and this time the words formed a comprehensible statement. "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

Armed with this new information, Neville finally understood what he was witnessing, and he couldn't deny that the mirror was right about what he desired. He wanted to have his parents whole, and to have his Gran be proud of him. But most of all he wanted to be like Harry. Aware that none of this would probably ever happen, and about to burst into tears, Neville fled the room, slamming the door shut behind him as he did so. It was to be more than a month later before the mirror would be visited again.

The day after Neville's adventure, instead of heading for the library, Harry headed off to see Minerva for their usual Wednesday evening get together. Even though he didn't mean to bring it up again, particularly as several weeks had gone by, Harry once again found himself discussing the flying competition with Minerva. "I don't know why but I can't stop thinking about it, Aunt Minnie. If Professor Snape hadn't come along, I wouldn't have had to take part in that stupid competition, and I wouldn't have to be the seeker for Hufflepuff."

"Harry, what is about being a seeker that bothers you? I know you like flying, so it can't be that." Minerva patiently questioned Harry, having heard him say the same thing about the potion teacher's interference during their previous two sessions.

"I don't know." Harry evaded the question, as he had done when Minerva had tried to find out previously what was bothering him.

This time, however, Minerva decided that it was time Harry told her why he was upset, rather than just letting him moan about the situation. "I want to know the truth, Harry. Over a fortnight has gone by now, and as you still feel the need to keep mentioning it, then I believe that something in particular is bothering you."

"I..." Harry hesitated, before lifting his head on hearing Minerva's firm cough and meeting her eyes. A little unnerved by her steely gaze, he blurted out what was bothering him. "I don't want everyone to look at me." Harry knew it was silly but it seemed to him as if he'd been stared at all of his life. First of all for being a 'freak' at school because of Dudley, then in Diagon Alley for being the Boy Who Lived, and now for beating Draco and being awarded the seeker's position.

"That is going to happen no matter what, Harry. People will always stare at you; at least in the wizarding world they will. And the fact that you're the only first year in a century to make a house team isn't helping matters." Minerva's voice and steely look had gentled, and on seeing how miserable Harry had become at her words, she took hold of Harry's hand. "I know you want to avoid the attention, but I'm afraid that's simply not possible for you. So even if you hadn't had to take part in the competition, or you'd turned the seeker's position down, people would still point you out. Harry, you're the Boy Who Lived, and just like everyone in the wizarding world, the pupils in this school know what you're famous for."

"Something I don't even remember doing." Harry's voice was as bitter as Neville Longbottom's had been when the boy had been discussing Harry with Ron.

"That doesn't matter to them." Minerva tried to explain to Harry why he was so revered. "For years before that wonderful and terrible night, people went through the most horrific times; something you can't understand without living through them yourself. And when you

somehow vanquished You-Know-Who, you gave them back the hope that they thought they'd lost forever."

Harry sighed heavily, and acknowledged that Minerva was right but he still had a gripe about the competition. "Okay, so I understand why people point at me for being the Boy Who Lived but I'm fed up with getting dirty looks from Slytherin because pupils from other houses still keep on congratulating me on beating Malfoy. I mean it's been almost three weeks since the competition! You think it would have stopped by now."

Minerva refrained from saying that Harry himself hadn't been able to put the competition behind him. Instead she opted to remind him of Slytherin's poor standing in the school. "If you'd beaten a member of any other house except for Slytherin, then it would have."

"I know that." Having initially wanting to become part of Slytherin, Harry might not have been predisposed to hate the house, but he knew that his feelings weren't shared by the other three houses. "It's just that I wish people would stop acting as though I did something brilliant in beating Malfoy. I didn't. I just got lucky." Harry grumbled. "It's almost as bad the whole stupid Boy Who Lived thing."

"The pupils will stop hassling you after your first game; at least about beating Mr. Malfoy anyway." Minerva smiled brightly, and then delivered the bad news. "But you should prepare yourself for attention of a different kind afterwards. Because dependent upon the result of the game, you're going to end up either being reviled by your housemates if you lose the match for them, or the Ravenclaw team if you win."

"I already guessed that." Harry had seen the 'in favor' train in action himself, and he knew that only one side was going to be feeling friendly towards him after the match. Not wanting to spend his time dwelling on things that wouldn't be happening for quite some time yet, Harry turned his attention to his guardian's experience at Hogwarts. "Was it this tough for you at school?"

"It was but for very different reasons." Minerva didn't tell Harry that she'd been teased incessantly by her housemates because of her crush on her transfiguration teacher, now the current headmaster. And, as it was almost curfew, and believing that Harry was a little too young to be concerned with affairs of the heart, Minerva got to

her feet. "I'd tell you about it but I think it's time you were heading back to Hufflepuff."

Harry put down his empty mug that bore his name, and which had been full of hot chocolate until Harry had drunk every last drop of it. "Before I go, I meant to ask you a question about Christmas."

Minerva had already told Harry that she would be staying at Hogwarts, meaning that Harry would also be spending his vacation at the school. "What is it?"

Harry, however, didn't have a question about his living situation. "Is there any way I can get Christmas presents without leaving the school?"

Minerva nodded. "There's owl post, or Hagrid is going to Diagon Alley on Saturday for me. I could..." She suddenly stopped speaking, an idea forming in her mind. "Or, as you don't have lessons that day and it's almost Christmas, I don't see why you couldn't go with him as a special treat. If there's anything you don't manage to get then, I can take you shopping after school breaks up. But if you have homework, then you'll have to wait until I take you or order your gifts from a catalogue."

Harry had no intention of using a catalogue if he could go shopping in the exciting environs of Diagon Alley. "I'd much rather go to Diagon Alley with you or Hagrid."

Normally Minerva would never have sanctioned such a trip during term time. But after finding out that Harry had never experienced a proper Christmas celebration, nor indeed bought or received gifts, she was willing to be a little more lenient than usual, hence her bending the rules. "Then I'll ask Hagrid if he doesn't mind you accompanying him. But don't forget about your homework."

Excited, Harry was very fervent in his response. "I'll make sure I get everything done before Saturday, Aunt Minnie." Harry's homework assignments had begun to dwindle with most of the teachers not wanting to have to read through pupils' work with Christmas almost upon them. Only Severus Snape continued to ply work upon them unrelentingly, and Harry had already made arrangements to complete his potion assignment with Hermione on Sunday.

"Good but I'll still have to clear it with the Headmaster, so don't count your chickens until I've spoken to him." Minerva warned, even though she was almost one hundred per cent positive that Albus would say yes.

"I won't." Harry promised. He then bid his guardian goodnight, and hurried out to head back towards his house.

Harry's chicken counting was soon over, and less than a week later, Harry found himself standing in Gringotts, his face alight with joy as he climbed out of the cart that had just taken him down to his vault and back to the surface again. "That was brilliant, Hagrid. Don't you just love the way the cart rocks when it goes around the bends?"

At the memory, Hagrid clamped a large hand over his mouth, his stomach threatening to rebel. When his stomach finally calmed down, Hagrid felt safe enough to remove his hand and he managed to answer Harry. "Not so much."

"I bet you liked the dragon then." This time when he'd ridden in the wobbly cart, Harry's attention hadn't been focused elsewhere, and he'd seen a glimpse of a wing and a stream of flames from deep inside the tunnels.

Now Hagrid's face softened. "If only I could get a dragon like that, everything would be jus' perfec'. It could live with me in meh hut."

"Hagrid, your hut is wooden." Harry pointed out.

As Hagrid responded to Harry's comment, a blonde girl shot forward. "Harry!"

Harry didn't answer Hagrid's comeback, his attention now on the blonde girl standing in front of him. "Luna, what are you doing here?"

"Shopping with Daddy." Luna turned as a very strange looking man joined them, and Luna slipped her hand into his. "Daddy, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is my Daddy, Xenophilius Lovegood."

Harry refrained from staring at the man who looked like a cross between a character he'd seen on a movie about a gull-winged sports car and time travel, and an aging hippie. "Hello."

"Hello." Xenophilius returned the greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"Shopping." Harry wanted to back away, a little unnerved by the fact that one of Xenophilius' eyes was obviously not quite normal, the eye in question pointing inwards towards his nose. "You?"

"Shopping with my angel." Xenophilius smiled down at Luna, who returned the gentle look.

Hagrid knew Xenophilius from Hogwarts, and held out his hand to greet him. "Phil, nice to see yeh."

The two men then got into a conversation together, leaving Harry and Luna with an opportunity to converse without the adults listening in on their conversation. "Have you just come up from the vaults?"

"No." Luna shook her head. "We're about to go down and make a withdrawal."

"I've just been to mine." Harry's voice was full of excitement as he revealed what he'd witnessed this time. "And I saw a dragon on the way back up."

"I love dragons." Just like Hagrid, Luna became dreamy as she thought about the winged beasts. "I'd like to own one."

Harry wondered if the entire wizarding world was mad about dragons, or whether it was just Hagrid and Luna. "So would Hagrid. He'd said he'd like one but he's planning to keep it in his wooden hut!" As Harry revealed Hagrid's desire to own a dragon, neither he nor Luna spotted a man waiting at a counter behind them; a man that had begun to pay attention to their conversation.

Having no idea that she was being eavesdropped upon, Luna shot down Hagrid's idea. "That's mad. His hut would burn down."

"That's what I tried to tell him just but he just said that he could always build a new one." Harry then recalled something Hermione had mentioned, when she'd been reading through an advanced book on defense while she waited for Harry to finish his homework, and he hoped that it was right. "Isn't it illegal to own dragons, anyway?"

"Yes." Luna confirmed Harry's answer. "But from what Daddy has said, I don't think that would bother Hagrid." Luna's father had told her all about Hagrid when she'd mentioned that Harry was now friends with the large groundskeeper.

Harry found himself wondering whether he'd walk into Hagrid's hut one day, and either up being eaten or set on fire by a dragon the big man had hidden in there. "Let's just hope he doesn't ever get his hands on one."

"I don't think he can." Luna had no idea though about what Hagrid might be allowed to do at Hogwarts. "I know that most dragons live in places like Romania or the Rocky Mountains in America." She frowned as she tried to recall what else she'd read in a book her father had given her about exotic animals. "Err, and you need lots of space to keep a dragon. How big is Hagrid's hut?"

"It's not very big, and he only has one room." Harry had no real idea how big a dragon could get or how much space it needed. "How much space do you need?"

"I can't really remember." Luna admitted, even though she knew she'd read about it. "But I do know that it's a lot." Wanting to ask about a very different but still dangerous animal, Luna pulled Harry to one side, even further away from their guardians but closer to the man at the counter. "Have you been back to see the dog?"

"No way." Harry violently shook his head, almost unable to believe that Luna would have even let the thought cross her mind, let alone expected him to have done something that stupid. "That thing has three chances to bite, and I'm not going to give it one."

"But you said it went to sleep when you started singing." Luna remarked, her voice a little wistful. "It might let you pet it then."

As Luna finished her first sentence, neither child took any notice of the sharp intake of breath that came from the man who was still listening in on their conversation. And they therefore continued to chat about the dog, Harry wearing a stunned look at Luna's second comment. "You can't be serious. I'm never going anywhere near it ever again."

"But if you don't go back, you won't find out what the dog is guarding." Luna protested, Harry having filled her in on what he believed the dog was doing in the school.

Harry gaped at his friend. "I don't want to know what it's guarding."

"You really don't want to know?" Luna asked, a little disappointed at Harry's lack of enthusiasm about the mystery.

"No." Harry's voice was resolute. "I have enough on my plate already."

"I'd have liked to see it." Luna's voice regained its wistful air, and her eyes sparkled as she thought of something. "I bet the dog would be nice to you if Hagrid introduced you to it."

"I don't want to be introduced to it. I've already met it." Harry decided that Luna was a little too crazy about animals, and told her so. "You and Hagrid would get along well. You both like scary animals."

"Most animals are only scary because you don't know how to treat them." Luna was a little like Hagrid in her belief that most animals were unfairly maligned. "Or you're frightened of them. And I bet that Hagrid isn't scared of that dog."

"It's his dog so he shouldn't be." Harry then revealed what he considered the most disturbing part about the Cerberus. "And he calls it Fluffy!"

"That's really sweet." Luna was enchanted by the name, and decided that Harry was overreacting. "So perhaps Fluffy's not as bad as you said after all."

"Believe me, you wouldn't want to be in the same room as that thing when it's awake." Harry shivered at the memory. "Its teeth were bigger than my fingers." Harry was exaggerating a little but the experience hadn't been a fun one for him.

With the two adults picking that moment to rejoin them, Luna had little chance to say much more to Harry. Instead she decided to ask Hagrid directly about the Cerberus and its mission. "Mr. Hagrid, what is Fluffy guarding?"

Harry winced at Luna's bluntness but it had the desired effect with Hagrid going red and warning Luna off. "Tha's between Professor Dumbledore and Mr. Flamel." Hagrid's mouth was then treated to another hand clamping when Hagrid realized that he'd maybe said a little too much. "Jus' forget about Fluffy. Both of yeh." He then turned to Harry. "Time to be gettin' on, Harry. We've things to do."

Even though he'd continually told himself that he didn't care about Fluffy, Harry filed the information about 'Mr. Flamel' away. "I'd best be off then."

"I'll write to you about what dragons need." Luna decided to look through her book when she got home. Also it would give her an excuse to try and pester Harry about finding out about Mr. Flamel, and maybe visiting Fluffy again.

"Thanks." Harry wasn't really that interested in dragons, but not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings, he smiled politely. When Hagrid looked pointedly at the door, Harry went to follow him, only to stop as he remembered the reason why he was in Diagon in the first place. "I'll be sending your Christmas present with Hedwig."

Luna had already sorted Harry's present out weeks earlier. "I'll get Daddy to shrink yours, and Hedwig can take it back with her." Then quite unabashedly, Luna stepped forward, and wrapped her arms around Harry's waist. "Have a Merry Christmas, Harry."

This time Harry knew what to do, and instead of stiffening up, he relaxed into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Luna, and returning the gentle hug. "You too, Luna."

After they separated, Luna headed off towards the vaults with her father, and Harry went with Hagrid onto the main thoroughfare of Diagon Alley to begin his Christmas shopping.

Harry's excitement about Christmas was about to have a damper placed on it when, just before the Hogwarts Express was due to leave, Fred collared him. "Harry, we won't be here over Christmas."

"Why not?" Harry was aware that the Weasley parents, and Fred's little sister were supposed to be visiting Fred's brother, meaning that the remaining Weasley siblings would have to stay on at Hogwarts. Only now that didn't seem as if it was going to happen.

"My brother..." Fred didn't get a chance to say anything else as George came dashing out.

"Come on, Fred." George grabbed Fred by his overly long scarf that their mother had knitted, and dragged him out of the front door. "We're going to miss the train. He'll write, Harry."

As the twins dashed for the train, George questioned Fred. "What were you doing?"

"I was trying to tell Harry about why we'd suddenly changed our plans." The twins' stay at Hogwarts had been changed only hours before the Express was due to leave.

The twins' mother, Molly, had sent an owl to the school to say that a dragon had injured their brother Charlie, who worked on a dragon reserve in Romania. Her missive had explained that someone had stolen an egg and the egg's mother had been extremely unhappy about it, Charlie receiving the brunt of her anger, resulting in his healer ordering him home to recuperate. And Molly had therefore declared that she wanted her sons to come home from Hogwarts to spend Christmas back at the Burrow, the Weasley family home. So the twins, Ron and Percy had all hurriedly packed, said their goodbyes, and joined the majority of their school friends who were returning home.

"You can write and tell Harry." George repeated what he'd already said to Harry, his breathing now heavy after the mad dash to the train station. "And we can also send him his Christmas present at the same time."

"I suppose. I was looking forward to seeing his face when he saw what we'd gotten him." Fred's voice reflected his disappointment.

Running onto the platform, George spotted Lee holding open a bright red door and gesturing wildly to the two boys. "Look, it's Lee. Ron or Percy must have told him."

Cheering up at the sight of their best friend, Fred yelled out to him as the two boys hurried to board the train. "Thanks Lee. If we'd missed this, Mum would have gone mad."

"Yeah." George shoved his brother inside just as the whistle blew.
"Do you think she's baked?"

"Stupid question, George. Mum will have baked enough to feed an army." Fred retorted, and the conversation turned to food as all three boys dropped onto their seats, all thoughts of Harry and Hogwarts pushed aside.

Back at Hogwarts, Harry was left standing alone, the mystery of why the Weasleys were no longer staying over for Christmas going unsolved. Aware that standing in the drafty doorway wasn't going to provide him with any answers, Harry despondently made his way back to his common room. He would have been a lot happier if he'd known what was going to happen to him a few days later.

Next Chapter: Harry experiences a Christmas to remember.

Chapter 10: A Christmas Armistice

Harry had just picked up a pretty silver and red knitted scarf when a pair of voices interrupted him, and he span around. "Fred! George!"

"That's so your color, Harry." Fred teased, spotting the scarf dangling between Harry's fingers.

"Going to wear it on Christmas Day, Harry?" George joined in with his brother's teasing.

"No." Harry reddened. "I was thinking of buying it for Susan for Christmas."

"Little Harry has a girlfriend." Fred thought it was hilarious to see how uncomfortable he was making Harry.

"You know very well that Susan's just a friend." Harry protested. "And I'm not just buying her something." At this point, Harry held up his other hand to reveal a silver bracelet that had little dragon charms attached to it. "I'm also going to buy this for Luna."

"So you've got two girlfriends then." Fred sniggered.

"No." Harry was getting annoyed with the teasing, and was about to walk off.

Noticing Harry's movement, George nudged his brother. "Let's leave him alone now."

Fred was about to say something about it being fun when he spotted their mother bearing down upon them. "Look out. Mum's coming."

"Fred, George, I'd rather you didn't wander off." The woman glanced at Harry, immediately presuming him to be a friend of her sons. "Hello, dear."

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley." Harry responded politely, aware from Fred's comment exactly who the short, red-headed woman was.

Molly Weasley was pleased by Harry's manners, and she therefore apologized for what she was about to do. "I'm sorry, dear, but Fred

and George have to be off now." She then started to shepherd her sons away from Harry.

Fred realized that his mother had no idea who she was talking to. So far Harry had managed to hide from any photographers that had tried to take his picture, leaving the general public, including Molly Weasley, completely unaware of what he currently looked like. "Err, Mum, this is Harry Potter."

It wasn't exactly surprising that Molly hadn't recognized Harry straightaway. Harry's usual marked resemblance to his father wasn't so evident at that moment. His hair was currently hidden by a woolly hat, and he was also wearing the new contacts that Minerva had taken him to get fitted with first thing that morning so that he'd have less trouble seeing when playing quidditch in the rain. Harry had already decided he preferred the contacts to his usual glasses.

On learning who Harry was, Molly immediately turned back around, and her face became a picture of both sadness and pleasure. "Do you know that I haven't seen you since you were a baby?" Not giving Harry a chance to respond, she went on. "But I should have guessed who you were. You look a little like your Dad, and you have your Mum's eyes."

"You knew my parents?" Harry, as usual, was eager to talk to anyone who'd known his Mum and Dad.

"I met them a few times." Molly didn't go into detail, and she abruptly changed the subject, her tone becoming a little worried and bossy. "Now what are you doing out here alone?"

"He's not alone, Molly." A female voice interrupted them. "I accompanied Harry here."

"Minerva, it's lovely to see you." Molly greeted her former teacher. "Are you chaperoning Harry in place of his relatives so that he can buy Christmas gifts for them?" From the twins' letters, Molly was aware that Harry had gone to live with Lily's sister as a baby but she knew little more than that.

Minerva didn't get a chance to respond as Fred jumped into the conversation. "Nah. He's staying at Hogwarts because his relatives don't want him home."

Molly's facial expression changed to one of horror. "They don't want him home at Christmas?"

"Nope." George backed up what his brother had said before asking his mother a question. "So can Harry come home with us, Mum? It's going to be boring at Hogwarts for him."

Harry blushed under all of the attention. "I like it at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, Mum." Fred ignored Harry's protest and repeated George's question. "Can Harry come back with us?"

George added a rejoinder to his own plea. "Yeah, Mum, can he? He's far too thin, and needs feeding up."

Molly was well-known for her love of food, and for forcing it upon those she believed needed it. She clucked sympathetically as she scanned Harry, taking in his tiny frame, and judging him in need of the feeding up her son had claimed. "If it's okay with Minerva, then yes, Harry can come back with us."

Minerva wholeheartedly trusted the compassionate woman. And, since finding out about Harry's true home life situation, she knew that before he had asked Minerva to become Harry's guardian, Albus had first debated in reassigning Harry's care to Molly. "He may, but someone will need to bring him back to Hogwarts when he wants to return. I'm on duty over the Christmas period."

George and Fred exchanged delighted glances, and both chorused together. "He can come back with us on the Express."

"I can't stay that long." Harry spat out hurriedly, not wanting the twins to impose his company on their family without their mother's say-so.

"If Harry decides he wants to return before the Express is due to leave, I'll ask Arthur to return him to school." Molly promised. "Otherwise he can return with the twins."

Harry felt a little overwhelmed by events, and as usual, found an excuse as to why he couldn't do something. "But I haven't got any clothes with me."

"I'll arrange for something to be delivered to you with Hedwig." Minerva promised. She had hoped to spend Christmas morning with Harry but on reflection decided that the young boy would have far more fun at the Weasleys. He'd also have the opportunity to witness what a real family Christmas should be like. "Have you finished shopping yet?"

"No, I need to pay for this before I get what else I need." Harry went red again when everyone stared at the scarf. "I'll go and pay for it now."

With Fred and George in tow, Harry hurriedly disappeared towards the till, leaving Molly and Minerva to chat. "How long will you be here?"

"I'm going to take Harry for some lunch after we finish shopping." Minerva had already planned to take him to a little restaurant that sold her favorite meal, Cullen skink, a soup containing potatoes, cream and smoked haddock. And she was intending to introduce Harry to a Forfar bridie, ground beef and onions wrapped in a light pastry, since just like Molly, she felt that Harry needed feeding up. "So how about we say that we meet up at the Leaky Cauldron at about three?"

"That works well for us." Molly assured Minerva after thinking through what they still needed to do in her head.

The two groups split up when the three boys returned.

Before Harry knew where the time had gone, he found himself standing in the Leaky Cauldron, his face pale as he watched Fred vanish in a flash of green flames.

Harry had never used floo powder before, Minerva choosing to travel via the Knight Bus with Harry, and he had been more than a little alarmed at the manner of Fred's mode of transport. "Mrs. Weasley, doesn't it burn?"

"No, dear." Molly put an arm around Harry. "Now just grab a handful of the floo power as Fred did and throw it in the fireplace. When it flares up green, step into the fireplace, throw down the powder, and say 'The Burrow'."

Harry did as Molly told him, and his world quickly became a disorientating spinning nightmare. By the time his vision had finally cleared, he'd been spat out at the other end, landing with a thump on the floor. When he looked up from his knees, he found Fred grinning down at him. "That was horrible."

"You get used to it." Fred grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Welcome to the Burrow."

Looking around the room he'd just fallen into, Harry's mouth fell open in surprise. He'd never seen a house quite like it; a rocking chair was moving on its own; a broom was dancing around the floor sweeping up mini fluff bunnies; and most intriguing of all, a clock stood in the corner that had situations labeled around its face, and not numbers. "Wow."

"So what do you think?" George had joined them by then.

"It's amazing." Harry didn't look at George when he answered. He was still taking it all in, his eyes finding something new in every corner.

The twins were pleased that Harry liked their home, and chorused together. "Great."

A small red-headed girl came running into the room. "Where's Mum?"

"I'm here, Ginny dear." Molly stepped out of the floo just in time to catch the girl's question. "Has Charlie been taking good care of you?"

"Mum, I can look after myself." Ginny protested, before asking a question. "Do we have any chocolate biscuits? Charlie wants some with a cup of tea."

"Left-hand cupboard over the sink." Molly directed her towards the culinary delights. "But before you dash off, I have someone I want you to meet."

Ginny had spotted the boy in the woolly hat, and sighed heavily. Even though she was only ten, her mother wasn't above future matchmaking. "Okay."

Harry took over from Molly, pulled off his hat, and offered his hand to Ginny. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter."

Her resigned demeanor vanishing, Ginny was totally taken aback to finally meet the one boy she'd ever had any interest in. And George and Fred knew this. Ever since she was old enough to understand, Ginny had been obsessed with hearing about the tiny baby who had defeated Voldemort. The twins therefore had to leave the room and entered the kitchen, their fists stuffed into their mouths so that their mother wouldn't hear them laughing at Ginny's deer in the headlights expression. Completely mesmerized by Harry, Ginny barely noticed them go, and confused words tumbled out of her mouth in reaction to Harry's greeting. "H...Hello, Ginny, I'm Harry."

Ginny's nervous response to Harry was too much for George and Fred, who could still hear what was being said, and twin explosions of laughter reached the ears of the occupiers of the sitting room, driving Molly to head into the kitchen to berate the boys. Harry, however, took pity on the young girl, and he ignored her faux pas. "Hi Ginny. I'm a friend of the twins."

Still nervous, Ginny nodded, her mouth dry. "Yes."

Realizing that the young girl in front of him was horribly nervous, Harry tried to think of something to say to relax her. "Are you looking forward to coming to Hogwarts?"

His efforts received yet another monosyllabic answer. "Yes."

"Hello." A stocky red-headed man came limping into the room. He was completely oblivious to the drama playing out, his focus elsewhere as he interrupted the stilted conversation. "Where are my tea and biscuits, Gin?"

The words 'Harry Potter' were all Ginny could manage before fleeing.

The new arrival understood his sister's predicament, and he took little notice of her departure. Instead he offered his large and calloused hand to Harry. "Charlie Weasley." Unlike Ginny, Charlie

wasn't the slightest bit put out by who Harry was, and he proceeded to tease the boy. "I never expected to meet the great Harry Potter, especially not in my front room, and chatting up my sister."

"I'm not chatting up your sister." Harry was horrified that Charlie would think that. He was also more than a little peeved that Charlie was obviously one of those people who thought that Harry had done something wonderful, and Harry's tacked-on rejoinder was more than a little defensive. "And I've done nothing special, and I'm not great."

Charlie recognized that he'd upset Harry, and he immediately owned up to his intent. "I was just teasing you, Harry; on both counts." Charlie wrapped his fingers around Harry's hand as it was finally placed into his. "And it's nice to meet you."

Harry resisted the temptation to shake out his fingers when Charlie finally released his hand; Charlie's grip had been firm and more than a little rough. "You too."

"So what brings you here?" Charlie led Harry to the sofa to sit down, and then yelled out before Harry could respond. "Gin, get the biscuits and a cup of a tea for Harry."

At Charlie's casual attitude, Harry became aware that as he'd claimed, Charlie had indeed simply been teasing him about both his sister and Harry's greatness. "I bumped into the twins in Diagon Alley, and one thing led to another and your Mum said I could stay over Christmas."

"I expect she'll shove you in with Ron, who was supposed to be sharing with Percy." Charlie seemed unperturbed that Harry was going to be invading his family's home at Christmas, and merely nodded towards the stairs, indicating that Ron, or at least his room, was up there. "I suppose Percy will end up back in his room with Bill and me."

"Won't that make things a little crowded?" Harry became concerned that he was going to cause a squeeze in the Weasley household. "And what about the twins?"

"Bill is arriving on Christmas Eve and leaving on Boxing Day, so it won't be too bad." Charlie informed Harry. "And the twins have their

own room but no-one in their right mind would want to share with them."

Harry would have; he wasn't too pleased to hear that he'd have to share with Ron, but politely he said nothing. "Don't you live here all the time then?"

Charlie took the mugs of tea and plate of biscuits from a blushing Ginny, who fled again, before shaking his head. "I usually live in Romania."

Harry realized then that this was the brother that the Weasley parents should have been going out to visit. Because George and Fred hadn't gotten around to writing to him, Harry was still in the dark as to why Charlie had come home instead. But before he got a chance to ask, Charlie obligingly continued speaking, filling Harry in. "Mum, Dad and Ginny were supposed to be coming to stay with me for Christmas but I injured myself when a mother got free after someone stole one of her eggs. I got in the way of her rampage, and got trampled. So instead of my family coming over to Romania, the healers ordered me home to recuperate."

Harry had no idea that Charlie worked with dragons. Fred and George had only said in passing that both of their eldest brothers worked in different countries, but typically for them, neither had said what either sibling did. "Babies?"

Charlie quickly comprehended from the young boy's puzzled look that Harry probably had no idea what he did as a profession. "I'm a dragon handler. At the moment I'm still training though."

Now Harry understood what Charlie meant about the babies, and how he could have possibly gotten trampled by a mother. "Isn't that a dangerous job?"

Charlie had to admit that it was. "Yes it is but it's worth it. I absolutely love working with dragons."

Harry wondered how you knew that you loved dragons enough to work with them, and asked Charlie exactly that. Charlie smiled as he recalled what had set him on his career path. "I first came into contact with wild animals when I met Hagrid. A baby wolf he was nursing back to health in his hut got out, and I came across it. I don't

know who was more frightened, me or the wolf. Anyway, Hagrid found both of us before things turned ugly, and he began to introduce me to more and more animals when I professed to being an animal lover. And at my career session before I left school, my current position was suggested and the rest as they say is history."

At the mention of Hagrid, Harry had recalled the conversation he'd shared with the large man. And he now shared this information with Charlie. "Hagrid said he'd love to have a dragon."

Charlie wasn't surprised to hear this. "Hagrid's wanted a dragon for as long as I can remember. I keep expecting him to turn up where I work."

Harry laughed at the look on Charlie's face, deciding he liked this Weasley as much as he liked the twins. "You'd better lock your dragons up then."

In return, Charlie decided that he liked Harry, and that the dark-haired boy wasn't at all what he'd expected. "I'd probably do better locking up Hagrid." Wanting to know more about the boy who was sitting in front of him, Charlie changed the subject to focus on Harry, who was still laughing. "George told me that you've just made seeker for Hufflepuff."

All at once Harry's laughter died. "Yeah but I didn't want the position."

Charlie didn't know that. "So why did you take it?"

Harry shrugged, and explained what had happened. "So I couldn't say no, and there was no-one else to really take the spot if I did. Well, Cedric Diggory could have but that would have left the team without a reserve chaser or reserve seeker."

"And you couldn't allow that to happen." Charlie knew only too well how injuries and a lack of decent players could affect a team's chances. "I don't know if the twins told you but I played seeker for Gryffindor."

Harry didn't know that. "Did you like it?"

Charlie's face became alight with joy. "I loved it. If the weather was better, and I wasn't injured, I'd have taken you outside for a little practice." His enthusiasm died when he remembered what Harry had said. "But seeing as you don't really like flying or quidditch, then perhaps it's a good thing we can't go out."

From the way Charlie's face had lit up, Harry had guessed that the young man had enjoyed playing, and he didn't want his newfound friend to get the wrong idea about Harry's own feelings. "Actually I really love flying." Harry had no clue that his own face now looked a little like Charlie's as he thought about flying. It changed though when he thought about the crowds that had witnessed his victory over Draco. "But I don't like people staring at me."

"I'm afraid that comes with the territory." Charlie broke off from what he was saying to crane his head behind him when he heard footsteps. And spotting his younger brother, he filled him in on the situation. "Ron, I think you're going to be having a different roommate for a few days."

Ron's face didn't reveal his shock at seeing Harry Potter sitting chatting with his brother in the middle of their sitting room. "Right." He then turned around and walked away.

"I take it that you and Ron don't get along?" Charlie hadn't missed the fact that the two boys had said nothing to each other, not even providing a polite smile.

"Not really." Harry admitted, and suddenly feeling uncomfortable, he got to his feet. "Perhaps I'd better ask your Mum if I can go back to Hogwarts. I don't want to make things awkward."

"Don't be daft." Charlie waved off Harry's fears. "Ron will behave as long as you do."

Harry had no intention of being misbehaving when he was a guest in someone else's house. "I won't do anything wrong."

Charlie smiled at Harry's concerned expression. "I didn't think you would. Now sit back down, and we'll have a little talk about quidditch, and we'll see if I can't get you a little more fired up about the game."

Harry didn't think Charlie would succeed but he didn't want to offend him, and so he sat back down. "Okay then."

Charlie began. "I want to tell you about a move called the 'Wronski Feint'..."

After that first afternoon, Harry's time at the Weasleys fell into a set pattern. During the day, he'd spend it talking to Charlie about quidditch and dragons or with the twins up in their room. Then at night, Mr. Weasley would quiz him during and after dinner about everything Muggle; something Harry found both exasperating and fun at the same time.

And it hadn't been as bad as he'd thought it would be sharing a room with Ron. The two boys said nothing to each other outside of the bedroom resorting to polite comments or nods, mostly for Molly's sake. And they shared even less dialogue inside the bedroom since Ron usually went to bed first and pretended to be asleep when Harry joined him, and Harry would get up long before Ron was even awake.

This unspoken armistice continued until Christmas morning, when Harry opened his eyes to find that Ron's bed was empty. After getting washed and returning to the bedroom to get dressed, Harry headed down into the sitting room to find the Weasley clan were all still pajama clad, small piles of ripped Christmas paper sitting beside each member. However, he couldn't see Ron, but a small pile of paper without an owner told him that Ron had definitely been there. "Good morning."

"Morning, Harry." Molly hurried over, and put her arm around Harry, leading him to sit next to Ginny, and placing him right next to the ownerless pile of wrapping paper. "And Merry Christmas." Molly handed over the Christmas present that she'd picked up when Harry had appeared.

Harry's mouth dropped to his chin in surprise. "You got me a Christmas present?"

Molly ignored Harry's bad grammar. "Of course, dear. You don't think we'd leave you out, do you? And just so that you know, we do the main Christmas present opening after dinner but we always

open one present before breakfast." When Harry made no move to open his gift, Molly gently chided him. "Come on, Harry, open it up."

Harry's fingers trembled as he opened the brown wrapping paper that covered his gift. Pulling the ends of the paper apart, he found a homemade scarf in his house colors. Soon though, it disappeared in a blur of tears. Not wanting anyone to see him like this, Harry dropped the paper to the ground, and with the scarf in his hands, he ran back up to the room he was sharing with Ron. As he flung himself on the camp bed that Molly had set up for him, he tried hard to regain control of his emotions, and he hoped that the Weasleys would leave him alone to do so.

A knock at the door a few moments later meant that Harry's hopes were about to founder. "Yes?"

Charlie pushed open the door. "Are you alright?"

Harry shook his head, glad it was only Charlie. "I've... I've..." Harry couldn't get the words out, and his tears became fully fledged sobs.

Charlie didn't hesitate and marched fully into the room, hefting the young boy onto his lap as he sat down on Ron's bed. He then began rocking him, much like his mother would have done for him when Charlie was younger and upset. "Don't you like your gift?"

Harry howls were the only answer Charlie got, and so the young man let his charge cry it out.

When Harry's sobs became few and far between, Charlie tilted Harry's head up. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" As he did so, Charlie noticed his mother standing in the doorway, and he almost imperceptibly shook his head to tell her that he wouldn't require her help. Worried about Harry, Molly pulled back and out of Charlie's sight but stayed on the landing listening.

Between hiccups and blowing his nose with a hankie Charlie provided, Harry told him what had upset him. "I've never had anything like this before."

Charlie didn't know whether Harry was upset or moved by his mother's gift. "What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter." As he regained his composure, Harry began to sink back into his shell.

"You're going to tell me otherwise I'm going to feed you to one of my dragons." Charlie's voice was firm but gentle at the same time.

Harry was still reluctant to share what was wrong. "I really shouldn't tell you."

"Then don't." Charlie wasn't going to push Harry. "But if you want to talk, then I'll listen to you."

In Charlie's arms, Harry understood that he didn't have to tell Charlie what was bothering him but that if he wanted to, then Charlie would listen. Harry therefore decided to reveal why he was so upset. "My relatives have never bought me anything for Christmas, and this present is the first decent thing I've ever had." On his tenth birthday Harry had received a coat hanger and a pair of his Uncle Vernon's old socks, but he hardly considered those a decent gift, and certainly not something worth mentioning.

Charlie was shocked. "Never?"

"Aunt Marge, Uncle Vernon's sister did give me a box of dog biscuits once." Harry admitted.

Charlie's voice reflected his disgust. "Dog biscuits? How could anyone treat someone like that?"

After spending several days with Charlie, Harry trusted the young man, and wanting to get things off his chest, he decided to open up completely to Charlie in a way he'd never done to anyone else, not even Minerva or Albus. "They did it because they hate me, and..." And so Harry revealed what he'd gone through growing up; the beatings; the ostracization at school; how he'd acted stupider than he really was; and his hopes of escaping it all. He even revealed that Minerva had taken over as his guardian.

When Harry had finished, Charlie wasn't exactly astonished that Harry had reacted as he had done to the simple handmade gift. But when Harry had been speaking Charlie had picked up on one emotion that had seemed to tinge Harry's recitation. "Harry, you

don't believe that how your family treated you was your fault, do you?"

"Sometimes." Harry confirmed Charlie's suspicion. "I tried so hard to please them. I really did. But nothing ever seemed to be good enough."

Charlie thought over what he'd been told before finally deciding on what to say to Harry. "Harry, you know what happened to me last week, don't you?"

"Yes." Harry couldn't see what this had to do with his family's treatment of him but he was about to find out.

"Well, your relatives are just like the mother dragon, Dravina, who attacked me." Charlie supplied the name of the Romanian Longhorn whose egg had been stolen from her. "And you are me as far as your relatives are concerned."

Harry didn't catch onto Charlie's analogy. "I don't understand."

Charlie broke it down further for Harry. "Your relatives hate you because they fear you and the magic inside of you in the same way that Dravina feared what I'd do to her, even though she was far more powerful than me. And although you can do magic, because they're adults your Aunt and Uncle hold more power than you, and they know it."

"Sorry, but I still don't understand." Harry looked up at Charlie through his damp eyelashes, half-expecting him to be wearing an exasperated or angry look.

Charlie was experiencing anger but not at Harry, and he was also taking care not to show it. "That's okay." Charlie then went on to further simplify his explanation. "Harry, the major difference between Dravina and your relatives is that Dravina's attack was instinctual but your relatives knew exactly what they were doing. They were responsible for their actions, and as such they should take the blame, and not you."

Harry let Charlie's words sink in before answering him. "So it really wasn't my fault that my relatives hurt me?"

"Absolutely not." Charlie assured the young boy. "Harry, your relatives' treatment of you was utterly wrong. And if your Aunt had had one shred of decency she would have apologized to you for her ill-treatment of you when the Headmaster left." Charlie, like Harry, had no idea what had transpired between Petunia and Albus but being older than Harry, and being reasonably familiar with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Charlie had assumed quite rightly that Albus had taken the woman to task. "But she didn't. Instead she chose the coward's way out and ignored you instead."

Harry was intrigued by Charlie's words. "I always thought I was the coward because I was afraid of Aunt Petunia."

"You're not a coward, Harry." Wanting Harry to understand that he meant every word, Charlie made sure that he was staring into Harry's eyes when he spoke. "You were just a scared little boy who had no-one to turn to, and you had every right to be afraid of your Aunt. And you are scared of her even now, aren't you?" Charlie hadn't detected any real fear in Harry's voice when he'd mentioned Vernon during his talk with Harry, but Charlie had easily been able to determine that Harry was afraid of his Aunt.

"Yes, and..." Harry's words suddenly dried up. He felt ashamed that he was afraid of his Aunt especially when he considered what had happened to Charlie and when he thought about what he'd contemplated at the thought of having to return to his hated childhood home.

"And what, Harry?" Charlie wasn't going to let Harry clam up now.

"I have to go back for two weeks at the start of the summer, and... and... I thought about running away." Harry blurted out.

"Why, Harry?" Charlie kept up the pressure.

Harry hung his head as he told Charlie why, and more about what he'd planned. "Because I love it at Hogwarts, and I don't want to go back to my relatives. I was going to use the money I'd taken from my account and try and get a room somewhere for the two weeks before Aunt Minnie got me."

Charlie could understand Harry's desire to run from what frightened him, but he was determined to make sure that Harry was aware that

he couldn't chose this option, no matter how badly he wanted to. "Running away wouldn't solve anything. And people would worry about you. What you have to remember, Harry, is that your Aunt is afraid of you and what you can do. When you spend time with her, just remember that she is the coward and not you."

Harry tried to put himself in his Aunt's shoes, and he wondered how he'd have reacted to a child who could do magic. After thinking it over for a few minutes, he decided that he'd never have treated him as his Aunt did. "But she still shouldn't have been so mean to me."

"No, she shouldn't, Harry." Charlie agreed with Harry's assessments. "But when people are afraid, they can hurt people without necessarily meaning to do so." Not that Charlie really believed that Petunia hadn't meant to hurt Harry.

"You mean like when Dravina hurt you?" Harry used Charlie's dragon to analogize his comment, in the same way Charlie had to him.

"Exactly." Charlie confirmed.

Mentioning Dravina gave Harry food for thought. "When Dravina hurt you, were you scared?"

"Very much." Charlie had believed that he was going to die but didn't reveal that to Harry. But he did want Harry to know that it was okay to be scared of things.

"How do you deal with being scared?" Harry asked, hoping Charlie could provide him with the answer of how to deal with his own fears.

"In a situation like Dravina's, I wasn't scared until after she'd hurt me." Charlie had been running on instinct and adrenalin up until that point. "But when I was scared, I thought about my Mum."

Harry didn't follow Charlie. "What do you mean?"

"When I was little, I wandered off." Charlie had had a bad habit of doing so, and normally he'd made it home by himself but this occasion had been very different. "By the time Mum had found me it was dark and I was terrified. But instead of telling me off as most parents would have done, Mum just said that any time after that if I

was ever lost or scared, all I had to do was sit tight and think of her, and no matter what she'd come and get me. So when Dravina attacked me, I found myself thinking of Mum."

"But your Mum was in England then, and she wouldn't have been able to get you." Harry pointed out.

"You've seen the clock in the sitting room, haven't you?" Charlie answered with a question.

Harry nodded; he loved the clock. "Yes."

"Well, when Dravina attacked me, the hand that represents me moved to mortal peril, and Mum noticed." Charlie smiled softly to himself, remembering what had happened. "I was barely conscious when I felt myself floating, and I heard Mum's voice telling me that she was there."

"She went all the way to Romania?" Harry's voice held a hint of awe.

"Yes." No-one had been more surprised than Charlie to hear his mother. It was only afterwards when Charlie had regained consciousness that Molly revealed that she'd used the portkey Arthur had purchased for their intended visit to Charlie in Romania. "When I needed her, she was there for me. I think she'd have even taken on the dragon if she'd had to."

"I wish I had someone like that." Harry's voice became sad.

"You do." Charlie didn't know why but during their talk he'd begun to feel just as protective towards Harry as he did towards his winged charges. "You've got me now."

Harry didn't believe Charlie. "But you barely know me."

"That doesn't matter." Charlie brushed Harry's protest aside. "If you need me, I'll be there for you, Harry. You're going to be part of this family now."

Molly, who was already in tears after listening to Harry, and then hearing Charlie's words about her, struggled to hold back even more tears at hearing Charlie's promise to Harry. She knew better than Harry that Charlie was someone who kept their word; he was a little

like her in that regard. Realizing that Charlie really didn't need her help, Molly wiped her eyes, and headed back downstairs.

Inside the bedroom, Harry's eyes were wide, still unable to believe that someone he'd known for less than a week appeared to care more for him than his relatives, who'd known him for most of his life. "But what about your family? What if they don't like it?"

"Harry, my family will support me in whatever I do. That's what loving families are all about." Charlie gave Harry a lopsided grin. "And besides, your relatives don't deserve you, and I believe I do."

Harry smiled back at Charlie's cocky comment. "You deserve me?"

"Don't you think so?" Charlie's voice had become light and teasing, but his face had taken on the pretence of looking hurt. "Or aren't I good enough for you?"

Harry immediately tried to wipe away the despondent look. "Of course you are."

"Then that's settled." Charlie smiled widely, but he was still aware that it would take Harry a lot longer to actually well and truly believe that he'd be there for him. "Now wash your face, and we'll go get some breakfast."

Harry's face immediately took on an apprehensive look that Charlie translated without problem. "Don't worry, no-one's going to finger point or laugh at you. If they do, then they'll answer to me."

With Charlie championing him, Harry was able to do as Charlie said. But he needn't have worried, for no-one said anything to Harry about his outburst before breakfast. It was only afterwards that Harry was approached, and by a most unlikely source.

Harry was sitting in front of the fire watching the flames flicker and twist into shapes which, if he looked hard enough, looked like animals or people he knew, when Ron coughed to interrupt his thoughts. "Yes?"

"I was wondering if you'd like a game of chess." Ron suggested.

Not wanting anything to do with Ron, Harry found an easy excuse to say no. "I've never played before, so I don't think so."

Ron wasn't put off. "That's okay. I'll teach you."

Not wanting to make a scene, Harry had little choice but to acquiesce when Ron pulled a rounded piece of wood that acted as small table between the two boys, and began to set up the pieces. Harry resigned himself to the fact that he was going to learn to play chess whether he wanted to or not, and noticing Molly watching them, he asked about the hand-carved chessmen. "Is this your chess set?"

"Yeah. It was my grandfather Weasley's." Ron placed the final piece onto the board, and began to explain. "Now, to move you..."

Harry's first few games were disastrous as he began to try and learn how each piece moved. It didn't help that Ron's chessmen weren't exactly co-operative. It took Arthur Weasley's intervention for Harry to finally get some help by providing the two boys with a Muggle chess set. "I was given this by a Muggle who I helped with a fireplace that somehow managed to get connected to the floo network." Arthur didn't bother to tell Harry that the Muggle had been obliviated afterwards and probably wouldn't remember giving the chess set to him.

Ron scowled. "But they don't move, Dad."

"This will be better for Harry while he learns the game." Arthur ordered Ron's chessmen back into their box, and grumbling, they did as he demanded.

Ron then set up the new pieces, and began explaining the rules all over again. This time Harry began to understand how the game worked now that his chessmen weren't arguing with each other and shouting at him. And even though Ron beat him four times on the run, his final defeat actually required some effort from Ron. The boys' games came to an end when Molly told them to go wash up for dinner.

Cleaning his hands, Harry found himself wondering why Ron had suddenly changed his attitude and had entered into what could only be described as an almost friendly truce between the two boys.

Harry had no way of knowing that Ron's absence from the sitting room before breakfast had been because he'd been in the bathroom; the bathroom right next door to the bedroom Harry had fled to.

Ron had therefore overheard everything that had been discussed between Charlie and Harry through the paper thin walls. And Ron had been stunned to learn that the young boy had never received a Christmas present before except for a crappy box of dog biscuits, and he'd been horrified when he'd learnt what Harry had gone through growing up. He, like Neville, had assumed that Harry had been treated like a pampered prince at home, and to find out that they'd gotten it totally wrong had made Ron think. So, when he'd spotted Harry looking into the fire, and trying not to make eye contact with anyone else, Ron put himself in Harry's shoes. And wanting to make Harry feel comfortable, he had come up with the idea of inducting Harry into his favorite game. And after playing chess with Harry, Ron found himself nurturing a tiny hope that the two boys could actually become friends. A hope that was about to increase after dinner.

Next Chapter: Harry's Christmas Day continues; Harry finally reveals what Luna discovered; Harry and Hermione encounter the strange mirror.

Chapter 11: The Mirror of Erised

Harry exchanged almost shy smiles with Ron as the two boys passed each other at top of the stairs, with Ron heading to take Harry's place in the bathroom. After making his way downstairs, Harry headed into the kitchen. "Can I help, Mrs. Weasley?"

Everyone in the Weasley clan knew only too well to keep clear of the kitchen when Molly was cooking on holidays; she tended to get a little frazzled. But after Harry's upset, Charlie was confident that Molly wouldn't treat Harry in the same way she treated them. She didn't. "Of course you can, Harry. You can help Ginny lay the table." With Harry heading to join Ginny, Molly decided it was time that the other boys helped as well, and so she poked her head out of the kitchen to tell them exactly that. "Bill, can you get the wineglasses from the cupboard; Percy, you can get the plates out; George, Fred, you can make sure we have enough chairs, and Charlie, you can take it easy."

Arthur was already busy opening the bottle of red wine that Minerva had sent over with Harry as a way of saying thank you for taking Harry in, and Ron had managed to escape doing anything, joining everyone only after it had all been done. Bill and Arthur had used magic to move the sofas so that they could add an extra leaf onto the dining table, and Harry wondered why there were more place settings than people. "Is someone else coming to dinner, Mrs. Weasley?"

Bustling in with large bowls of roast and mashed potatoes floating in front of her, Molly was a little hot and bothered as she answered Harry. "Yes."

Harry was therefore left wondering who the mystery guests were but his curiosity was soon sated. Barely two minutes had gone by when the fireplace flared up, and Minerva McGonagall stepped through, brushing dust from her unusually bright green robes, which were trimmed with a red tartan plaid. As soon as she'd taken care of her appearance she greeted Harry. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

"Merry Christmas, Professor." Harry thought he'd do well to keep things on a formal footing since he didn't know if the Weasleys were aware of Minerva's status as his guardian.

"Merry Christmas, Minerva." Molly swept back into the room with yet more food.

"Merry Christmas, Molly." Minerva turned as the fire flared up again. "As I said when we spoke earlier, I have someone with me."

Harry's face lit up when Susan stepped out of the fireplace. "Susan, what are you doing here?"

"There was an emergency at BritAD and Aunt Amy had to go into work. She thought you were still in school so she dropped me off to spend the day there." Susan quickly explained, before apologizing to Molly. "I hope that I'm not going to be a nuisance, Mrs. Weasley."

"You're not, Susan dear." Molly didn't care how many people she had to deal with. As far as she was concerned, it was a case of the more the merrier. And she knew Susan well because of Arthur's position at the Ministry.

"In that case, can I help?" Susan offered.

Molly had finished cooking, and now all that remained was to transport everything to the extended dining table. "Yes, you and Ginny can come and collect some dishes."

Minerva smiled at Harry before following Molly and the girls into the kitchen to help them with the delivery of the massive Christmas meal. Soon the table was groaning with a mass of gastronomic delights, which included among other things, a brown crispy skinned turkey, mini chipolata sausages wrapped in streaky bacon, roasted parsnips and carrots, bread sauce, cranberry sauce, sprouts, bread rolls and pats of fresh butter. A large Christmas pudding was sitting on a side table just waiting to have a little alcohol poured over it and ignited. And at the side of the pudding there sat a white bowl that contained whipped cream.

Molly beamed happily as she surveyed the spread in front of her. "I think that's it. I was expecting a few more people though."

As if she'd heard Molly, the fireplace flared up again, and Luna popped out. "Merry Christmas."

Molly hurried over and hugged the young girl. "Merry Christmas, Luna. I'm so glad you came."

Xenophilius Lovegood followed Luna out of the fireplace. "Merry Christmas to one and all."

"Phil, nice to see you." Arthur shook hands with his neighbor. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it."

"I got a little carried away reading." Phil smiled at Luna. "Luna had to drag me away."

"I was hungry." Luna told everyone.

"I'm glad to hear it." Molly pulled out her chair. "Now everyone take a seat, and tuck in."

Harry had no chance to talk privately to either of his friends as, with their mouths watering, everyone sat down, and Harry found himself book-ended between Susan and Ginny, both of whom tried to keep giving him food. George and Fred were delighted at the obvious vying to serve Harry, and would have teased their friend about it but a warning look from their mother stopped the boys in their tracks. Dinner progressed smoothly once Harry's plate was full but after his strange morning, he found the whole experience a little disconcerting. And the instant dinner was over, he fled to sit next to Charlie, who'd moved to sit on the more comfortable sofa. Luna soon joined them and sat on the other side of Charlie. She'd been thoroughly amused by how Ginny and Susan had fawned over Harry but she didn't get a chance to tease Harry since the main present giving began moments later.

Molly glanced around. "So who wants to go first?"

"I do." Wanting to get it out of the way, Harry jumped up and grabbed the pile of gifts he'd placed under the tree. He then went around the Weasley family handing out the token gifts he'd bought with Minerva's help. She'd picked well. Arthur had been ecstatic with his book on Muggle electronics, and Molly had delightedly hugged Harry for her magical cookery stand, which would float after her supporting whatever cookbook she was using and read out the instructions. Harry had bought confectionary for the siblings he didn't really know that well, not wanting to be too ostentatious.

Luna, who'd already received her gift, smiled up at Harry who was now hovering nervously as the Weasley siblings finished opening their gifts. "Thank you for my bracelet." Luna lifted it up to show Harry that she was wearing it. "Your gift is under the tree."

Harry had already spotted the gift with his name on that had been wrapped in bright yellow paper with smiling faces on it; totally un-Christmassy but very much Luna. "Thanks, I'll open it in a little while."

While Harry had been talking to Luna, Ron had opened up his gift from Harry to find a massive container of boxed chocolate frogs, one of his favorite sweets. "Thank you, Harry."

"I wasn't sure what to buy you but Professor McGonagall said you were fond of those." Harry took one of the frogs when Ron offered up the container to him.

"I love them." Then, remembering his manners, Ron handed the frogs around to everyone in the room. Only once everyone had taken a frog, did Ron open up one of the boxed frogs himself and slip it joyfully into his mouth. After savoring the rich milky chocolate flavor, Ron removed and examined the wizarding card that the box had contained. He sighed disappointedly. "Morgana. I've already got her."

Luna swallowed the last of her frog. "Do you collect the cards?"

Ron nodded. "I'm just missing Agrippa and Ptolemy."

On hearing that, Harry glanced down at the card in his hand, before handing it over to Ron. "Here, you might like this one then."

Ron's whoop of joy filled the room. "Agrippa." He then sobered up and offered it back to Harry. "You should keep it. They're really hard to find."

"No thanks." Harry refused the card. "I don't collect them."

Ron's hopes of becoming friends with Harry were given a boost with Harry's gesture. "Thanks, mate."

Harry remembered telling Ron that he'd never be his mate but given how the situation between the two of them had changed only that morning, he simply smiled instead. "You're welcome."

Nursing his coveted card, Ron sat back down and the little spark of hope that Harry might be willing to be his friend after all grew even brighter.

The present giving then continued, and it was about to be Harry's turn to be delighted, and more than a little astounded when Minerva handed over what could only be a broomstick. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

Harry ripped off the wrapping paper to discover a Nimbus 2000. "I can't accept this."

"Yes, you can." Minerva's voice was firm. "You need a decent broomstick, and I will not let my charge ride around on something substandard."

"Your charge?" Molly caught onto the mention.

"Even though he will be returning to stay with his relatives for the first two weeks of the summer holidays, for all intents and purposes I have taken over Harry's guardianship." Minerva fixed the twins and Ron with a steely eye. "Something that is not to be mentioned at school." Only Percy avoided being bestowed with the glare, Minerva more than aware of Percy's being a stickler for doing as he was told.

All three boys promised they'd say nothing, Ron more ardently than his brothers. Running an awed hand over the broomstick, Harry got up and shyly hugged Minerva, able to do so now that the cat was out of the bag. "Thanks, Aunt Minnie."

"Make me proud." Minerva returned Harry's hug before winking at him. "At least your team has already faced Gryffindor, so I don't have to warn you off."

Harry grinned at Minerva. "There's always next year." Harry had completely forgotten that he didn't intend to try out again despite Charlie's exciting tales of games from times gone by.

As this was going on, Charlie had gotten up, and limped upstairs. When he came back down, the circle had reached Harry again. "Before you open that, I have something for you."

Harry took the gloves from Charlie. They were far older than his own gloves. But like them, they were made of leather. However these had a well-worn look and feel to them. "Are these yours?"

"I was wearing them when Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup in my final year." Charlie hadn't passed them on to the twins since beaters wore a totally different type of glove. "And I'd like you to have them."

"But you must love them, otherwise you wouldn't have kept them." Harry ran a finger over the softened butter colored leather.

"I do love them, and I expect you'll love them just as much." Charlie sat back down, before adding his own warning. "And I also expect you to make me proud. And don't think I won't expect an account of your first game, because I will."

Touched by the gift, Harry swallowed hard, his tears of that morning not far away again. "Thank you."

Sitting beside Bill, Ginny was a little jealous; she'd hoped to become a seeker for Gryffindor, and that Charlie, her favorite brother, would pass the gloves on to her. Trying to hide her disappointment and envy, she turned to Minerva. "Professor, will other first years be allowed to be seekers?"

Knowing why Ginny was asking, Ron snorted. "You can't even fly."

"Yes, I can." Ginny snapped at her brother. "And I wasn't talking to you."

Minerva hid a smile at the siblings' exchange. "Harry's appointment was a one-off, and was due to extreme circumstances."

Ginny's face fell. "I was hoping I'd get a chance at being the seeker for Gryffindor. Fred said that your current seeker is leaving at the end of the year."

"How do you know you'll get into Gryffindor?" Luna asked.

"All of our family has been in Gryffindor," Ginny pointed out. "So of course I'm going to get into Gryffindor."

Bill, who'd been largely silent up until then, coughed. "Err, you might not, Gin. I nearly ended up somewhere else first. I had to beg to be allowed to go into Gryffindor."

Unaware of this, the entire Weasley clan turned their focus on Bill, Molly's voice reflecting her bemusement. "You never said."

"I was too embarrassed." Bill admitted.

"You were going to be put into Slytherin, weren't you?" Charlie guessed that that was the only reason why Bill would have been embarrassed. While his brother wouldn't have been happy about being placed in Hufflepuff, he wouldn't have been uncomfortable about it, nor would he have felt the same way about Ravenclaw.

Bill nodded, his face burning. "Yeah. Apparently I would have done well in Slytherin."

"Well, I for one, are glad that you were one of my Lions." Minerva had been proud of Bill's achievements, which included head boy and 12 'O's in his NEWTs, the final exams a wizard or witch takes before leaving school. "But I can't deny that you do possess most of the attributes Slytherin prefers. You're ambitious, a good leader, you're resourceful, and you're a pureblood."

"He's also quite sneaky." Molly remarked wryly, remembering more than one stunt Bill had pulled growing up as a child. "But I want all of you, as well as Ginny, to know that, no matter what house you would have been or will be sorted into, we'd still love you."

Harry's heart felt as if it had been pierced at the loving looks the Weasleys shared at that precious moment, and he found himself wishing that he too could share a moment like that. He was therefore surprised and pleased when Molly came over and hugged him. "And don't think that you're not included in that statement because you are."

After the touching gesture, the present giving resumed yet again. And Harry found himself opening gifts from his school friends. Susan had given him a framed picture of his parents that her Aunt had

sorted out for her, and Harry had been choked up yet again, unable to speak as his parents waved at him from the picture. Harry could see that it had obviously been taken at their wedding, Lily wearing a white dress, and James wearing a suit.

After hugging Susan, Harry opened up Hermione's gift and grinned, glad of the respite from the turmoil of emotions his gifts had so far churned up in him. "I knew she'd give me something like this."

George had received the same gift, a homework reminder calendar, and he scowled. "What is she trying to tell me?"

"I think it's the perfect gift for you." Molly said firmly. She often wished her twins would apply themselves, and she hoped that George might now at least try a little harder.

Harry sniggered at Molly's comment, before turning his attention to his gift from Justin, which turned out to be a small portfolio of shares; something Justin's father had advised his son to give. Harry thought it a typically sensible Justin gift, and put it aside.

Susan glanced at it. "I received the same thing. Aunt Amy's going to deposit it in Gringotts for me."

"I'll have to do the same thing before I go back to school if I can." Harry had no idea whether the shares would ever be valuable but he decided that he'd best take care of them just in case. He then found himself holding the bright yellow gift that had been from Luna. After ripping off the paper, Harry discovered a pile of back issues of the Quibbler, which nearly all featured dragons on the front cover. Harry decided that they would be something he'd read when he was alone. He smiled at Luna. "They're just what I needed."

Luna's delight was obvious as she jumped up from her seat and hugged Harry. "I wasn't sure if you'd prefer to learn about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or dragons."

"The dragons are ideal." Harry had no wish to learn about Snorkacks, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Susan trying to smother a laugh. After being released by Luna, Harry watched the others opening their presents before he moved onto his next gift, a small mixed gift box containing joke items from Zonkos; the twins clubbing together to get Harry something. The three of

them exchanged knowing smiles, Harry having bought them something similar.

Finally, Harry reached a haphazardly wrapped gift. Untying the cord from around the silver paper, Harry thought at first that he'd been given a curtain. Instead, it turned out to be a cloak. As Harry shook it out, a note dropped to the floor, which Luna picked up. "Shall I read it?"

"Go ahead." Harry put the cloak around his shoulders before Luna could begin.

Ginny gave a small scream of shock at the sight of just Harry's head appearing to float in mid-air. "Your body's vanished."

Ron's jaw hit the floor. "That's an invisibility cloak. They're very rare."

"Who's it from?" Charlie asked.

Remembering the note in her hand, Luna read it out loud. "Harry, this belonged to your father, and I believe he would have wanted you to have it. AD"

Minerva hadn't been very pleased when she'd discovered what Albus had been planning to give Harry, and she'd made her objections known. Just as he had with the quidditch challenge, Albus had overruled her, and wrapped up the cloak that James had placed in his possession. But Minerva had come around when Albus had pointed out that Harry wasn't the sort to break rules and use the cloak for pranks, as both he and Minerva suspected James Potter and his friends had.

Harry's emotions again seesawed between joy and sadness that he was actually touching something that had belonged to his father. After a few moments, he recovered himself, and let everyone else try the cloak. Again Ron's hope of friendship grew all the more when Harry passed the cloak to Ron first.

After everyone had tried the cloak and finished opening their gifts, the excitement died down, and Harry was able to sit down and relax and have a few quiet words with Susan and Luna, who were both a little puzzled at Ron's behavior. "What gives with Ron Weasley?"

Harry explained about the chess games. "I don't know why he did it though."

"Perhaps he's still trying to suck up to you so that you'll be his friend." Susan suggested.

Harry disagreed. "I don't think that's it. I've had to share a room with him every night and he's said nothing to me until today. If he was really angling to be my friend, he'd have tried sooner. And to be honest he hasn't even mentioned anything about being my friend, so I honestly don't know what's changed."

Neither Susan nor Luna had any idea what it might be either. But Luna didn't really want to talk about Ron, and she therefore asked Harry in a hushed voice if he'd found anything about Mr. Flamel yet. Susan butted in at the mention of the unfamiliar name. "Who's Mr. Flamel?"

Harry had intended to keep quiet about what Luna had discovered but now the cat was out of the bag, and he had little choice except to tell Susan what Luna had done. "... and so whatever Fluffy is guarding, it has something to do with this mysterious Mr. Flamel."

Susan tried to recall if she'd ever come across the name. She hadn't. "I've never heard of him."

"Neither have I." Luna had looked through the books in her Dad's library. "And I went through all the stuff on wizards we own but most of the books are on animals."

"That's okay." Harry would have liked to know who 'Mr. Flamel' was but he wasn't chaffing at the bit to find out. "I'm not really that interested."

The conversation subsequently turned to other things, and the three of them chatted together until Minerva declared that they had to return to Hogwarts in order for Susan's aunt to collect her. Harry therefore hugged Susan and Minerva, and they both headed back to Hogwarts, Harry having decided to stay at the Weasleys and return with the twins on the Express.

Luna's own departure was imminent as well when a short time later Xenophilius announced that they had to visit relatives of Luna's

mother. Again Harry hugged a friend goodbye before being accosted by Ron, who'd diplomatically kept his distance while Harry had been talking to his friends. "Do you want to play chess again?"

Harry did, and so the two boys settled down in front of the fire for some more friendly battles.

Harry was seated in a compartment with Ron and the twins when Hermione walked by. Spotting Harry, she opened up the carriage door and stepped inside. "Harry, what are you doing here?"

"I ended up staying with the Weasleys over Christmas." Harry gave Hermione a brief explanation of events. "I didn't spot you when we boarded the train. Where are you sitting?"

"Three carriages down with Justin. I found you because I'm looking for Susan. We didn't see her on the platform before the train left." Hermione informed him, before smiling at Fred and George. "Hi, George, Fred."

"Hi, Hermione." George was brief with his greeting, not wanting to add fuel to the fire of his brother's teasing.

Sadly George's ploy failed, and Fred beamed brightly at the Gryffindor girl. "Hi, Hermione. Did you like George's present?"

Hermione's face turned beet red. "I did. Thank you for the sugar quills, George." Her face then became concerned. "Did you like your gift?"

The homework calendar was currently buried at the bottom of his trunk, placed there by his mother, and George had no intention of ever using it. But on seeing Hermione's worried look, he assured her that he had indeed been happy with it. "It's just what I needed."

"Oh good." Hermione sat down, and finally, and very reluctantly, greeted Ron. "Hello."

Ron didn't greet Hermione so coldly; instead he surprised the carriage's occupants. "Happy New Year, Hermione."

Fred, George and Harry all looked at each other in surprise, but none of them said anything. Hermione was a little taken aback but she politely returned Ron's greeting. "Happy New Year, ... Ron."

Ron took a deep breath and stood up. However, speaking didn't come easy, especially since the twins and Harry were bearing witness to what he'd planned to do. Squaring his shoulders, Ron spat out what he wanted to say before he could change his mind. "Hermione, I... I... I owe you an apology."

Hermione resisted the temptation to wiggle a finger in her ear to check to see if she'd heard him correctly. "What for?"

"For upsetting you at Halloween, and for not coming to get you." Ron had been influenced by what Charlie had said about being a coward and having to bear responsibility for your actions, and the guilt of what he'd done to Hermione had weighed heavily on Ron's mind over the Christmas period. "You're in Gryffindor, and I should have behaved better."

"Who are you, and where's my brother?" Fred couldn't help but ask.

Ron's already red face burned even more brightly, and he snapped angrily at his brother. "Get lost, Fred."

George was a little more sensitive to Ron's distress, and he grabbed Fred's arm. "Come on, Fred. Let's go find Lee."

The two boys left, leaving the trio alone. Harry also got up. "Perhaps I'd better go as well."

"No!" Both Ron and Hermione called out together, neither of them wanting to be left alone with the other.

"I'll stay then." Harry sat back down.

His face still a most unbecoming crimson, Ron smiled sheepishly, and he held out his hand to Hermione. "Hi, I'm Ron Weasley."

Hermione looked at it suspiciously, aware that if she accepted Ron's hand, then it was likely that Ron would become her friend. Not sure if she wanted this, Hermione hesitated for a moment. Then, remembering how upset she'd been when she had wanted to be

friends with the other children at her primary school but they'd rejected her for being a know-it-all, Hermione felt a pang of shame, and she firmly took Ron's hand. "Hermione Granger."

After shaking hands with Hermione, Ron turned to Harry and held out his hand again. "Ron Weasley."

Harry had gotten along better with Ron during the Christmas break, and like Hermione had doubts, but after how the Weasley family and Ron himself had treated him, he wasn't going to refuse Ron's hand. "Harry Potter."

An uncomfortable silence then fell over the group. Hermione decided to end the stalemate. "Where's Neville?"

"Dunno." In truth, Ron had almost forgotten about his friend, and feeling a little guilty, he rose to his feet. "Suppose I'd better go and look for him."

As soon as Ron closed the carriage door, Hermione turned on Harry. "What is going on with him?"

"I think Ron had an epiwhatsit." Harry couldn't remember the exact word he was looking for.

Hermione thought she knew what Harry was trying to say. "An epiphany?"

"Yeah." Harry agreed, and he then went on to tell Hermione about his stay at the Weasleys. The only part he left out was his conversation with Charlie; he wasn't ready to share that with anyone just yet.

Hermione agreed with Harry that Ron's actions had definitely not been about sucking up, which was what Susan had initially believed. "Perhaps his mother told him he had to be nice to you."

"I don't think so, otherwise he'd have been nice from the start. I don't know what but something definitely happened to change his attitude." Harry still had no idea that Ron was privy to what Harry had endured growing up.

"Well, whatever it was, Ron will probably want to hang around with us now." Hermione warned Harry. "Even though he's friends with Neville, I don't think that it was through choice. I think it was more because there was no-one else."

Harry hadn't realized that. "At least I can escape to Hufflepuff unlike..." Harry stopped speaking as the door opened. "Justin, Susan, hi."

"I was feeling abandoned, so I went looking for Susan when Hermione didn't come back." Justin explained why he had their missing friend in tow. "So did you have a good Christmas at the Weasleys, and what news do you have?"

It was evident Susan had filled Justin in on where Harry had spent most of the Christmas holidays. "I did have a good holiday, and I don't really have any news."

"He got an invisibility cloak." Susan revealed what she thought was important. "And a brand new broomstick."

"Who bought you a broomstick?" Being a Quidditch fanatic, Justin was most interested in the second gift.

"Professor McGonagall." Harry had received permission from his guardian to bring Justin and Hermione into the circle of people who knew about his new living arrangements, and he did so then.

Justin and Hermione were both happy for Harry; Justin more so as he knew slightly more than Hermione did about Harry's home life. "I'm seriously pleased for you."

"So what news do you have?" A little uncomfortable at being the center of attention, even amongst his friends, Harry questioned Justin.

"Nothing as exciting as your news." Justin had had a quiet Christmas. "It was just the usual holiday." Justin therefore quickly moved onto a different subject. "Susan said that you have something to tell us."

Harry couldn't think what that might be. "Such as?"

Susan reminded Harry about what he'd tried to hide from them. "Such as your shopping trip to Diagon Alley where you bumped into Luna."

With Susan jogging his memory, Harry came clean to his other two friends. "Err, I didn't exactly tell you everything about the conversation I had with Luna."

"And?" Hermione's voice was rather demanding.

"Luna asked Hagrid about what Fluffy was hiding." Harry revealed.

Justin leant forward. "And what is it?"

"He wouldn't tell her." Harry watched looks of dismay and annoyance settle onto his friends' faces, and he hurried to tell them the most important part. "But he did let slip that whatever Fluffy is guarding, it's between the Headmaster and a Mr. Flamel."

"I know that name." Hermione's brow wrinkled, her annoyance forgotten as she struggled to recall where she'd come across the name before. And her frustration was reflected on her face when she couldn't pull up the memory. "Darn it. I can't remember where I saw it."

Justin drew a total blank. "I've never heard of him."

"I hadn't either." Susan admitted. "And I didn't dare ask Aunt Amy. She'd have wanted to know why I wanted to know."

"It doesn't matter anyway." Harry consoled his friends. "It's not as if we're going to be searching for the item in question."

"I know that." Hermione couldn't hide her irritation with the unsolved mystery. "But I'd like to have some sort of idea as to what that dog is guarding or who this Flamel person is."

"Perhaps you'll remember who he is when we get back to school." Susan interceded. "But right now I think Harry should show you his invisibility cloak. It's really amazing."

Distracted by Susan's suggestion, all thoughts of the mysterious Mr. Flamel were pushed aside when the four children took turns at using Harry's cloak to sneak up and down the train.

On his return to school, Harry's year continued much in the same way as it had before Christmas except that Ron, and by extension, Neville, had become a peripheral part of their group.

On the second Saturday after they returned, Harry let his friends try out his new broomstick. Unwilling to try the broomstick, Neville had fumed quietly while Ron and Justin flew the Nimbus 2000 around the frosty quidditch pitch. Neville's disquiet had grown as Justin and Ron bonded over their shared love of quidditch, and Ron had only been too happy to talk about the various teams that made up the wizarding world's quidditch organization. No-one noticed how quiet Neville was, nor did they make any effort to include him their conversation, and Neville slipped away without anyone realizing.

Miserable, Neville headed back to Gryffindor, only for his feet to lead him to the same door he had come across the previous month. After glancing around him, he opened the door and slipped inside. It was over an hour later when Neville left, his face tear-streaked and he kept his head down as he headed back to the Gryffindor common room. His misery turned to anger when Ron, who had returned and was now playing chess with Dean, barely grunted at him. Muttering angry words under his breath, Neville headed upstairs, wishing he'd stayed in the mirror room.

If he'd stayed, Neville would have found himself being interrupted, for he wasn't to be the mirror's only visitor that day. After finishing on the quidditch pitch, Harry and Hermione had headed to the library so that Harry could complete his charms homework. Susan and Justin had already done their homework, and so they returned to Hufflepuff, agreeing to meet up with their two friends for dinner. And it was on the way from the library to dinner that Harry found himself spotting a glint of gold coming from a door he hadn't noticed before.

Not usually a nosey boy, Harry was going to continue on by but there was something about the room that almost unwillingly piqued his interest, and he turned back. Her head in a book as she walked, Hermione didn't immediately notice that Harry had retraced his steps, and continued walking until Harry called out to her. "Hermione, come here and look at this."

Hermione turned around to see what Harry wanted. As she neared the door, she too spotted a glint, and, like Harry, her curiosity rose to the forefront. Putting her book into her bag, she tried to see what was making the glint through the crack in the door without opening it. "I wonder what it is."

Harry decided he had to know, and reached out to push open the door. "I'm going to find out."

When the door swung open and Harry walked into the room, Hermione hurriedly followed him, not wanting to miss out on whatever they'd found. However, her voice reflected her disappointment when she saw what had caught their attention. "It's just a mirror." Intending to take a closer look, she almost ran into Harry when he stopped abruptly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Harry wanted to look into the mirror but at the same time he had a horrible feeling about it. "There's something off about that mirror, and it's giving me the creeps."

"It's just a mirror, Harry." Hermione sounded exasperated at Harry's reluctance, and she stepped around him to look into it. "See, it's just a... Oh my!"

Harry glanced quickly at the mirror but couldn't see what might have made Hermione gasp. "What is it?"

Hermione took a step backwards. "You were right, Harry. This is no ordinary mirror." After her shock, reason reasserted itself, and Hermione began to carefully examine the mirror. It was then she took notice of the writing that surrounded the frame, murmuring the words under her breath. Unlike Neville, Hermione immediately worked out what the writing was, and what it meant. "Of course, the mirror is showing me what I want." She frowned as she once more reviewed the image the mirror had produced for her. "But that doesn't make sense."

"Hermione, are you going to tell me what you're going on about?" Harry moved closer to the mirror.

Instead of explaining her cryptic comments, Hermione positioned Harry in front of the mirror. "Look into it."

Only half-wanting to, Harry did as his friend had requested. His viewing came to an end when he reacted in a similar fashion to Hermione, exclaiming and stepping away from the mirror. "Oh."

"What did you see?" Hermione asked, knowing that if she was right about the mirror's purpose, then Harry shouldn't have seen the same image she had.

When he responded, Harry's voice was tinged heavily with sadness, and more than a little envy. "I saw a loving family."

"Because it's something you've never had." A man's voice interrupted the children.

Both Harry and Hermione went red when they saw who'd entered the room, Hermione apologizing for their intrusion. "I'm sorry, Sir. We saw a flash of gold through the doorway, and we decided to see what was inside."

"Don't apologize, Miss Granger." Albus stepped into the room. "It's entirely my fault. I had meant to remove the mirror from this room before now."

"Why, Sir?" Hermione glanced behind her again at the mirror, before she returned her attention back to the Headmaster.

Albus walked fully into the room, and placed himself between the children and the mirror before answering. "Because it's not entirely safe, Miss Granger."

"But it's just a magic mirror." Harry pointed out.

"I'm afraid that it's a little more than that, Harry." Albus stepped to the side, and placed a hand on the mirror's ornate carved edge, taking care not to look into the glass itself. "This mirror is called the Mirror of Erised. And as you've probably already worked out, it shows a person's true desires; their deepest, darkest yearnings."

"So because I want a loving family that's what I'd see every time?" Harry queried.

"Unless your desires changed, then yes." Albus confirmed Harry's guess. "And if I was to leave this mirror here, you'd return again and again to view that vision."

"But what's wrong with that?" Harry wished Albus would step out of the way so that he could again see the family he'd always desired. "It's not as though the mirror can hurt me."

Albus knew differently, but didn't go into detail as he told Harry that he was wrong. "Harry, this mirror could hurt you far more than you could ever imagine."

Hermione couldn't see how. "Can it throw spells, Sir?"

Albus wasn't surprised that Hermione had chosen to ask a question of that nature. "It cannot. The mirror's weapon is the image it portrays, and what it does to the person who sees it."

Hermione's brain was already processing the information, and she had yet another question for the Headmaster. "Who made it?"

Albus couldn't provide Hermione with a name. "Nobody knows. But legend states that it was constructed by a dark wizard as a form of torture."

"How can seeing what you want be torture?" Harry knew he wanted a loving family but he'd wanted one all of his life, and he didn't see how the mirror could change that need to something harmful.

Albus realized that Hermione had probably worked out what the mirror did; her face had blossomed into understanding when he'd mentioned the torture. But he put it upon himself to explain further so that Harry would also understand. "Harry, my boy, people have gone mad looking into this mirror; the thought of whether or not what they saw might happen at some point in their future becoming too much to bear."

"Will I go mad then?" Harry asked hurriedly in alarm.

"Not after one viewing." Albus allayed Harry's fears before finishing his recitation. "But sadly that was the fate that befell far too many good people who couldn't resist the mirror's calling. And it's why I have to move it to somewhere safe."

"You don't have to do that, Professor. I won't keep coming back." However, despite his fears about being driven mad, Harry wasn't entirely sure that he was telling the truth about not returning. The happy, relaxed, and obviously loving family scenario he'd seen had already begun to eat away at Harry's heart. This was mostly because of the time he'd spent witnessing the Weasley family together over Christmas, and because as Albus had said, it was the one thing he'd never had. And so the thought of never seeing the vision again filled Harry with despondency.

Albus couldn't miss the pensive tone in Harry's plea, and he had the feeling that the mirror was already influencing Harry, so he refuted Harry's claim. "I'm afraid you would, Harry." Sadly Albus knew only too well the truth behind his own words. "But unlike those who have slipped into insanity trying to find or reclaim what the mirror has shown, you should know that one day you may achieve your heart's desires. One day it's likely that you will have a loving family all of your own."

Harry couldn't hide the yearning in his voice as he responded. "I'd like that, Sir."

"So would I." Albus smiled encouragingly at Harry before turning to Hermione. "If I'm not being too inquisitive, may I ask what you saw, Miss Granger?"

Hermione recalled her vision. "I saw a man but I couldn't see his face because his back was turned to me. There was also a young woman with him who looked a little like me. And a crowd of people but I couldn't see their faces."

Harry was confused by what Hermione had seen. "That's it?"

"No." Hermione's voice turned wistful as she remembered the strange, almost reverent look on the woman's face. "The woman was looking at the man as if he was the only person in the room."

"Hence the faceless crowd." Albus explained that part for Harry's benefit. He then went on to make a deduction about what he thought Hermione desired. "From what you've told us, I think we can hazard a guess and say that your heart's desire is true love, Miss Granger."

Because of her parents' explanation about love, up until that moment Hermione had never put much stock in the feeling, except as a chemical reaction, and said as much to Albus. "Daddy said that love is just another name for hormones, and that it's only romantic writers who've made love into a desirable emotion."

Albus shook his head in dismay. "It's far more than just that, Miss Granger. And when you've been in love, you'll understand." Albus could see that Hermione didn't really believe him. "You don't think that's true, do you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione didn't, and still favored her father's explanation, Albus' answer not really providing her with a rational response. "No, Sir. But even if true love does exist, I still think the mirror got it wrong about me."

Albus wasn't entirely taken aback by Hermione's claim. "And why is that?"

"Because I want to learn more than I want anything else in the world." Hermione's answer rang with conviction.

"That is what your head desires." Albus was well aware of how much trust Hermione placed in books and the knowledge they contained. "But as the mirror has shown you, your heart and soul seeks something entirely different, and that is true love."

Hermione couldn't help but continue to disagree. "I really don't think that there's anything such as true love."

At Hermione's response, Harry had to refrain from reminding Hermione of her crush on George Weasley. His thoughts were diverted away from George though when Albus gave the mirror a sideways glance, and a brief look of sorrow flashed across the Headmaster's face. It was then that Harry became aware that while the Headmaster knew what they wanted, they had no idea of the Headmaster's desires. So, even though he knew he shouldn't, Harry asked the same question Albus had of Hermione. "Sir, can I ask what you see in the mirror?"

"Socks, my boy, socks," Albus responded in a jovial voice, any trace of the sorrow vanishing behind a bright smile. "One can never have enough socks, and I do like them."

Both children realized that Albus wasn't telling the truth, but respectfully neither of them said anything. To bring the awkward moment to an end, Albus checked the time. "It's almost time for dinner."

Able to take a hint, Hermione decided that perhaps it was time they left. "I think we'd better be off, Harry. Everyone will wonder where we've gotten to."

Harry also took the hint, and the two children both then bid their headmaster a good evening.

Albus returned the pleasantries, waiting for the two children to leave before running a hand over the mirror. He then gave into his own cravings, looking deep into the mirror, and sighing wistfully when the mirror displayed the image of the one thing he most desired in its reflection. It was an image that Albus spoke sadly to, the sorrowful look Harry had spotted returning to mar his features. "You were everything I wanted, and I would have done almost anything for you. But where you went I could not follow, and you destroyed my hopes and dreams."

Conscious that it would do no good to brood over what might have been, and what for him would never happen, Albus reached into his pocket and took something out. Whispering a spell, a white light encompassed the mirror and the object in Albus' hand, before it and the mirror vanished from the room. Sighing heavily, Albus followed in the children's footsteps and left the now empty room. As he closed the door behind him, it morphed and vanished into the wall, leaving no trace that it and the room beyond had ever existed.

Next Chapter: Hermione discovers who Mr. Flamel is. She also comes to a startling conclusion with a little help from Luna Lovegood.

Chapter 12: The Philosopher's Stone

It wasn't long before his first quidditch match that Harry overheard a conversation between Hagrid and Dumbledore. He was outside practicing some of his moves when he accidentally overheard something he shouldn't have. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop but flying high up in the air on the unseasonably nice day, the sound of the two men's voices had drifted up to him. Harry frowned as he garnered the gist of the conversation. Not daring to land until the sound of voices had noticeably diminished, Harry flew around in circles and pondered what he'd overheard. Only when he could see that the Headmaster and Hagrid had entered Hogwarts, did he land and rush back towards the school.

Once indoors, he sought out his friends and passed on what he'd overheard. "I've just heard something you might want to hear."

Harry then relayed what he'd discovered. "So what do you think might be doing it?"

Each child shook their head and came up blank; none of them knew of any animals that would drink blood from a unicorn. Hermione rubbed her brow. "I can do some research and see if I can find anything."

"That would be good." Harry glanced at Susan and Justin. "What do you two think?"

"I think you should write to Luna." Susan suggested. "Or maybe look through those magazines she sent you. There might be something in there."

"I doubt it." Harry, however, didn't really know what the magazines contained since he hadn't bothered to pick up the magazines since he'd been given them for Christmas, and he therefore guiltily vowed to do so that evening. However, after he and Just had scanned all fifteen of them, they had found little to nothing on unicorns.

Justin did spot something about the night Harry's parents had died, and he decided that he'd read it when Harry was asleep; he didn't want to upset his friend if there was something horrible in it. "Can I read a few of these?"

Harry nodded absently. "Sure."

Justin stashed a few of the magazines in his bedside cabinet, including the one about the fateful Halloween night. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know." Harry was at a loss.

"Perhaps you should write to Luna like Susan said." Justin suggested. "Didn't you say that Luna has lots of books on animals?"

"She does." Harry's face lit up. "I should have thought of that myself. I'll do it now." All fired up, Harry grabbed some parchment and a quill, and quickly penned a letter to his friend. Then both he and Justin slipped out to find Hedwig.

Luna Lovegood opened up the letter she'd just received, and then smiled happily at her father as she recognized the handwriting. "It's from Harry." Her smile soon disappeared though.

Something Xenophilius noticed. "What's wrong, little one?"

"Harry wants to help Hagrid try to track down a killer. He said that it appears that something is attacking and draining blood from the unicorns in the forest around Hogwarts." Luna's voice was full of disgust. "How could anything do that to such a beautiful animal?"

Xenophilius' face immediately changed from concerned to horrified. "Normally I would say that it's simply nature's way but in this instance this is very grave news, Luna."

Luna had never seen Xenophilius look that worried about an animal before. "Why, Daddy?"

"Because to take blood from a unicorn is a heinous crime, little one." Xenophilius then went on to explain more fully to his daughter so that she could relay what he knew to Harry.

At Hogwarts, Harry opened up the letter he'd just received from Luna. "I didn't expect that."

"What is it?" Susan leaned over so that she could look at the letter that Harry had received.

"We couldn't find the animal that was killing the unicorns because there is no such animal." Harry and his friends had hoped to be able to come up with something to help Hagrid in his job. "Luna said that it has to be a person doing this, and a powerful one at that."

"Why powerful?" Justin asked, once he'd swallowed his mouthful of bacon. "Anyone could just take a gun and shoot it."

"We don't use guns in the wizarding world." Susan informed him. "Every wizard knows that. Even when fighting You-Know-Who, the Ministry never resorted to using Muggle weapons. It's an unspoken law that they're not used."

"Killing's a spoken law but You-Know-Who used to do that." Justin countered.

"It's just different." Susan didn't know how to put the quirk into words.

"Anyway," Harry interrupted before Justin and Susan could get into an argument. "Luna said that usually only women, forest creatures and other unicorns can approach a fully-grown unicorn. But that's not the worst part; the worst part is that the only real reason to drink a unicorn's blood is to stave off death. She said that her Dad said that it's likely someone or something very dangerous is roaming around the Forbidden Forest."

Susan shivered. "But this is a school full of children. Why hasn't the Headmaster said or done anything?"

"He probably doesn't want to frighten anyone, and he did ask Hagrid to try and track down the source of the attacks." Harry pointed out. "Or perhaps whoever is out there isn't a real danger yet."

Hermione tapped her pencil on the table. "You could be right. If they need to drink the unicorns' blood - and judging by the fact that the Headmaster said 'unicorns' and not 'unicorn' so this is an ongoing thing - whoever is out there could be very weak and therefore not a threat."

"Who or what do you think it is?" Susan asked in a quiet voice.

"I have no idea." Hermione couldn't think who would do such a thing. "You lot?"

Neither Justin, Susan nor Harry had any idea, and for the time being, the subject was dropped. However, less than a week later, their dismissal was about to explode into alarm.

Hermione's face was alight when she met up with the Hufflepuffs. "Guess what?" Not giving them a chance to answer, she continued. "I've remembered who Nicolas Flamel is."

"Nicolas Flamel?" Harry noted that Hermione had now given their mysterious Mr. Flamel a first name.

"Yes. I read about him ages ago." Hermione opened up her notebook where she'd jotted down her notes. "He owns the Philosopher's Stone." Hermione watched puzzled looks trickle over her friends' faces. "The Philosopher's Stone is reputed to be able to bring life or make gold, and it's therefore very valuable." Hermione, however, still wasn't finished, and her remaining words spilled out quickly in her excitement. "And I think that the Stone is being hidden here."

"Why hide it here?" Justin asked. "Isn't Gringotts the safest place for something that important?"

"I asked myself exactly the same question." Hermione's voice was full of triumph. "And I couldn't figure it out until I remembered about the break-in at Gringotts' Bank. I believe that the Headmaster took the Philosopher's Stone from the Bank before the break-in, and that's why the goblins denied anything had been taken."

"But why?" Susan questioned Hermione's hypothesis.

"Because someone is obviously after it, and it wasn't safe at the Bank." Hermione explained her reasoning.

"Hermione?" Harry suddenly had a horrible thought. "Do you think that the Stone has something to do with the unicorns that are being slaughtered?"

"I do." Hermione glanced down at the name she'd written on the page in front of her. "And I believe I know who is killing the unicorns,

and I also think that they're also the same person who tried to take the Philosopher's Stone, and that's why the Headmaster has a Cerberus in the school to guard it."

No-one had noticed Ron and Neville behind them. "What's a Cerberus?"

Justin answered Neville. "It's a three-headed dog."

"There's a three-headed dog in the building?" Ron's voice was full of curiosity.

Harry, who had swung around at the sound of Neville's voice, answered Ron. "Erm, yeah."

"How do you know?" Neville questioned Harry's claim.

"I got lost and bumped into it." Harry avoided mentioning George; from Ron's comment he had the feeling that George had said nothing about the Cerberus.

"Did it bite you?" Ron asked excitedly.

"No." Harry didn't admit that he'd cowered in the corner. "I sang to it and it went to sleep."

"You are joking, aren't you?" Neville didn't believe Harry.

"No, he's not." Susan joined in the conversation. "It was on the third floor."

"I thought we weren't supposed to go onto that floor." Neville observed correctly.

"I told you, I got lost." Harry reiterated his earlier comment.

"Okay." Neville finally accepted Harry's word. "But why do you think it's guarding this Philosopher's Stone thingy."

Hermione and the Hufflepuffs glanced at each other and, by unspoken agreement, she filled the two boys in on what they'd discovered. "... and so we think that Fluffy is guarding the Philosopher's Stone."

"And what about the unicorns you mentioned?" Ron noticed that Hermione had barely mentioned the creatures.

"We think that whoever is feeding off the unicorns is after the Philosopher's Stone." Harry informed him.

"Do you know who it is?" Ron could see the worry on the quartet's faces.

"No but Hermione said she has an idea." Susan glanced at her friend as she spoke.

"Who is it then?" Neville asked impatiently.

"I think it's You-Know-Who." Hermione announced, eliciting gasps of both horror and disbelief from the other children. "Who else would be powerful enough to take down a unicorn, and would want the Philosopher's Stone?"

"You can't be serious." Ron was terrified by the thought.

"Very serious." Hermione's face backed up the force in her words.

Harry swallowed hard as he thought about the implications. "Do you think he'll come after me?"

"I don't know it is him for sure." Hermione reminded Harry. "I'm just guessing."

"Your guesses are better than most people's surefire answers." George's voice chimed into the conversation, and he then explained why he'd joined them. "I couldn't help but spot you lot huddled up together. So what gives?"

The whole thread of thought was repeated for George, and for Fred, who was with his twin. George whistled at Hermione's suspicions. "That's quite a leap from the unicorns to the Stone to You-Know-Who."

"I know but I can't logically think of anyone else so awful who'd do something like this. I'd never have thought of him if it hadn't been for Luna mentioning that you have to be literally willing to give up your

soul if you slay a unicorn." Hermione defended her supposition. "Harry said that the Headmaster didn't think that You-Know-Who was dead, and who else would be willing to go to those extremes?"

Susan had her own horrible thought. "Do you think any of the teachers are helping him?"

The thought that a teacher might be helping You-Know-Who was almost as terrifying as the idea that the wizarding world's greatest nemesis might be back. Fred shivered. "I hope not. But you still can't be sure of any this; I mean you don't even know if it is the Stone that Fluffy is guarding."

Under the circumstances, Harry decided to come clean about his trip to Diagon Alley. "I promised the Headmaster I wouldn't say anything but when I went to Diagon Alley, Hagrid had fetched something up from the vaults for him. I'm only telling you now because I think it could have been the Stone."

No-one berated Harry for keeping the secret until then. "You think Hagrid is helping You-Know-Who?"

"Of course not." Harry thought Neville was mad to think that Hagrid would do anything so terrible. "He gave the Stone, if it was that he was collecting, to the Headmaster. If he was working with You-Know-Who, he'd have kept it for himself."

"Perhaps he's just waiting until You-Know-Who is strong enough." Neville countered.

"Don't be daft, Neville." Justin also leapt to the large man's defense. "Hagrid would never do anything like that. If there had to be anyone in Hogwarts helping You-Know-Who it would be someone like Snape." Justin, like his friends, loathed the teacher who made potion lessons a living hell.

"Actually the only teacher I saw at Diagon Alley was Quirrell." Harry revealed.

"Now that's stupid." Neville turned on Harry. "He's a big wimp. There's no way he'd have tried to break into Gringotts."

"I didn't say that it was him." Harry defended himself. "I just said that he was there. I actually agree with Justin. If any teacher is providing help, then I'd pick Snape." Harry was about to say that even though he thought that, he didn't really believe that any teacher, including Snape, would really help You-Know-Who, when Ron started speaking.

"I agree with you." Ron then revealed something that he'd thought nothing of at the time. "The day after Halloween I don't know if you noticed but Snape was limping, and I heard Filch ask him if he needed his dressing changing. What if Snape had tried to get into where the dog is on Halloween when that troll got in, and it bit him?"

Susan interrupted excitedly. "What if he let the troll in?"

"I bet he did." Ron decided that Snape had to have tried to get the Stone. "Trolls are really stupid. It couldn't have gotten in on its own."

"So if Snape really did try to get the Stone, then he has to be working with You-Know-Who." Justin declared in a firm voice.

"We don't know that I'm right about any of this." Hermione reminded Justin. "All I've done is to pick the most likely person."

"And I think you might be right." Susan, like Ron, was convinced that Snape and You-Know-Who were in cahoots.

"If it's true then what do we do now?" Harry asked.

"Watch Snape." Ron suggested.

"I could still be entirely wrong about everything." Hermione said again, not wanting to start something that could get them all into trouble.

"But you could be right." George interjected. "And I agree with Ron that someone had to have let that troll in."

Fred agreed with his twin. "He's right. I think we should watch Snape carefully, and maybe drop by the room with the Cerberus occasionally to make sure it's still there."

"I think we should tell someone." Neville believed that they should tell a teacher.

Harry, who'd usually be the first one to go to a teacher, shook his head this time. "We have no proof, and we're just guessing."

"But..." Neville began to protest.

Susan overruled him. "Neville, we can't. Harry and George would get into trouble for going onto the third floor, and Harry would get into trouble for listening in on a conversation."

"You've seen the dog as well as Harry?" Ron asked his brother.

"Yeah." George admitted. "I was with Harry on the night of the duel he was supposed to have had with Malfoy. It was then we saw it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron was more than a little annoyed that George hadn't told him.

"He told me." Fred grinned at Ron knowing it would annoy his younger brother.

"I only told you because you guessed something had happened." George reminded Fred of why he'd spilled the beans. "And because you said you wouldn't tell anyone."

"Well, I still think we should..." Neville tried again to say that they should take the matter up with someone in authority.

Fred turned on Neville, not wanting his twin to get into trouble. "I suggest you don't even think about this in a teacher's presence, let alone tell one. Not unless you want to end up at the business end of one of our pranks."

Neville didn't. He'd seen the twins in action far too often to want to mess with them. "It was only an idea."

"Keep it that way." Fred warned.

Hermione decided to step in before things got heated. "You don't have to threaten him. Neville wouldn't say anything anyway, would you?"

"No." Neville had little other choice except to agree. But inside he was fuming at Fred's heavy-handed treatment of him.

"Good." Fred's face was still full of threat.

Harry decided to redirect the conversation back to Snape. "Right, so we're agreed that we'll keep an eye on Snape, just in case."

"And we'll fly over the Forest." Fred suggested. "It won't seem suspicious if we say we're just practicing for our next quidditch game. Harry, you can do the same."

"I'll do some more research." Hermione decided. "You never know, I may have missed something."

"And Susan and I can help you." Justin didn't really like research but he didn't want to be left out.

With everyone agreed on what to do, the group disbanded.

Next Chapter: Justin reads the Quibbler; Ron discovers Hagrid is hiding something; Neville finds a way to get back at Harry and his friends for neglecting him.

Note: I had to split the chapter up due to time constraints, and so Ron and Neville's bits will appear next chapter.

Chapter 13: A Close Call

Justin waited until everyone was asleep before taking the magazines out of his side table and heading into the common room. By the light of the fire he found the one that had mentioned the Halloween night that the Potters had died. Opening it up, he began reading. He was so engrossed that he didn't notice Harry had come into the common room. "What are you reading?"

"Quibbler." Justin closed it. "I couldn't sleep."

"Anything interesting in it?" Harry thought that Justin looked a little uncomfortable.

"Nothing much." Justin couldn't stop the blush that crept up his face.

In the firelight the blush intensified. Harry knew then that his friend was hiding something, and he held out his hand. "Can I have a look?"

"Harry, I don't think you should." Justin kept a tight grip on the magazine. "I was reading about the night that You-Know-Who attacked your home."

"Why didn't you ask me about it?" Harry was puzzled why Justin had hidden it from him.

Justin shifted in his seat. "I know you don't really like talking about it."

Harry had to be honest. "I don't, but I would have talked to you about it." He held out his hand again. "May I?"

Justin handed it over. "It's probably nothing new to you. However, I hadn't realized that you had a brother. You never mentioned him, and I've never heard anyone else talk about him."

"Brother?" Harry ripped open the magazine and quickly thumbed to the relevant page. He was white by the time he'd finished reading. "I didn't know I had a brother."

Justin was horrified that Harry had learnt such news like this. "Your Aunt didn't tell you?"

Harry shook his head. "No. And why didn't anyone else tell me?"

"Perhaps they thought you knew." Justin suggested.

"I feel sick." Harry leant over the arm of the sofa and threw up.

Justin immediately got up and headed for the head prefect's room. Fifteen minutes later Harry was tucked up in bed in Minerva's rooms. "I'm sorry to be a bother, Aunt Minnie."

"Don't be sorry, Harry." Minerva pulled up the covers. "Shock is something that different people deal with in different ways."

"Did you know about my brother?" Harry felt better with Minerva holding his hand.

"Yes, everyone did. But I thought you knew, and it wasn't something that needed bringing up." Minerva explained why she had said nothing. "I saw how upset you were about your parents' photo. I would have gotten you a photo of Jamie but I didn't want to upset you again."

"Can I please have one?" Harry was desperate now to see what his brother had looked like.

"I'll sort one out for you at the weekend." Minerva promised. "It's the type of thing I keep at home."

"Thanks." Harry had to settle for Minerva's promise, and he soon settled down to sleep.

As she'd promised, Minerva found Harry a picture. "This is you, your brother Jamie, and your parents."

Harry stared hungrily at the photo. "What happened to Jamie, and why didn't anyone tell me about him?"

Albus, who'd joined them at Minerva's behest, sighed heavily. "I genuinely thought that you knew about Jamie."

"So why didn't he survive like I did?" Harry had plenty of questions that he needed answering. "If my Mum gave up her life to save me, why didn't she do the same for Jamie?"

"I believe that Voldemort attacked you first." Albus began to explain what he believed had happened on that fateful Halloween night. "And your mother defended you as any mother would."

"So why did Jamie die?" Harry persisted.

Albus closed his eyes as he thought about the scene, one he'd gone to survey after leaving Harry on his relatives' doorstep. "When Voldemort was vanquished by you, I assumed that the backlash of the magic destroyed his body, so no trace of him was ever found. And I'm afraid the same thing happened to your brother."

"So I killed him?" Harry's voice trembled as he asked the question.

"NO!" Albus' response was swift in denial. "Voldemort killed your brother just as he killed your parents. Don't ever let yourself think it was your fault, Harry. It was not."

"Okay." Harry only half-believed Albus, and he became silent for a moment, until a brief glimmer of hope began to grow as he remembered what else Albus had told him. "You said that You-Know-Who isn't gone."

"That is correct." Albus confirmed Harry's assumption.

Harry's voice began to rise with excitement. "Then perhaps the same happened to Jamie."

Albus sadly shook his head. "I don't believe that that is the case."

"But why not?" Harry's voice grew higher pitched with desperation.

"Because when Voldemort vanished he left behind his clothes, and although they were badly damaged, this led me to believe that he survived. If he'd died, his body would have remained, or both his clothing and his body would have been destroyed." Albus explained. "And unfortunately that was the case with Jamie; no trace of anything, including his clothing, was left. I'm so very sorry, Harry, but there is no hope at all that your brother survived."

Harry couldn't stop the tears that began to fall. "I thought that if he was still alive I wouldn't be alone."

"You're not alone." Minerva hugged Harry to her. "You have me, you have Albus, your friends, and you have Charlie Weasley."

"But... but..." Harry couldn't get the words out. Instead he was scooped onto Albus' lap, and he let the Headmaster comfort him as he cried for the brother he'd never known.

When Harry returned to his friends he was quiet, and none of them dared say anything except for Hermione. "Harry, I understand how you're feeling, and I know it hurts but it will get better."

Hermione's soft and caring voice pierced Harry's misery. "How do you know that?"

"Mum lost a baby when I was eight. Luke didn't make it past his first day." Hermione could feel herself tearing up, and she looked down, trying to hide her tears as she explained about her own loss. "I was so excited when I found out I was going to be a big sister, and it didn't happen."

Harry forgot about his own upset, and a little stiltedly he wrapped his arms around Hermione. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay." Hermione managed to get out, before she clung to Harry and cried yet again for the loss of the baby brother she'd seen only for a few minutes.

Deciding that perhaps they should leave the two grieving friends alone, George took Fred's arm and led him away, the rest of the group following their lead.

After the shock of finding out about his lost brother, Harry remained subdued for quite some time, but he eventually recovered and reverted to his usual self. School absorbed him, as did his outside interests, and almost before he knew what had happened, Harry's first quidditch game was upon him.

Waiting to fly out to face his opponents, Ravenclaw, Harry was filled with an excitement he'd never experienced before. An excitement that exploded into sheer joy when, less than ten minutes into the game, Harry won the game for Hufflepuff. His face was aglow as he held aloft the snitch he'd just caught. Around him the crowd was going wild.

The pretty Asian girl, the reserve for Ravenclaw, who like Harry was a first time seeker, Ravenclaw's usual seeker having been knocked out within the first two minutes of the game, reached over to shake his hand. "Congratulations, Harry. You flew really well."

"Thanks. So did you." Harry had never really seen the girl before, and was at a loss as to what her first name was.

The girl didn't fill him in. Instead she flew off to join her disappointed team mates.

Harry also flew off to find not only his team mates, but his Hufflepuff friends waiting for him. He handed the snitch to a delighted Justin. Harry had intended to give it to Hermione to thank her for her support over the previous few weeks but she'd told him to give it to Justin if he got it since Harry's fellow Hufflepuff would appreciate it more. Harry's spending time talking to her about what had happened to her little brother had been enough for Hermione. "Here."

"Thanks, Harry." Justin slid the victory snitch into his pocket. "That game didn't last long. Hufflepuff barely had time to score any goals."

"After Duffy was knocked out, and that girl took his place, I spotted the snitch, and I could see from her face that she had as well." Harry explained his speedy ending of the game. "So I couldn't afford to wait."

"I'll say." Greg Summerby shook hands with Harry. "Good call. Although I'd have liked more points before you caught the snitch it doesn't always work out that way."

"I was hoping for the same." Harry admitted as he pulled off the gloves that Charlie had given him at Christmas.

"Those gloves could do with updating, couldn't they?" Greg thought they were looking a little worn around the edges.

"No way." Harry ran a finger over the well-worn gloves. "They were a gift from Charlie Weasley. He wore them in his last match."

Aware of Charlie's history in quidditch, Greg changed his mind about Harry's use of the battered items. "Then you wear them. They haven't seen you wrong so far."

On that rejoinder, he peeled off from the group, just as Ron came running up. "I can't believe how quickly you caught that snitch. Can I see it?"

Justin held it out. "Harry gave it to me."

By the time the slightly more sedate Neville and Hermione reached the group, Ron was gushing over the snitch. Neville immediately thought that Harry had given it to Ron, and his jealousy bubbled up to the surface. "That's the winning snitch?"

"Yeah." Ron sighed happily as he looked at the small golden ball. "I'd love to play quidditch."

"What position?" Justin had had this conversation with Ron more than once, but it still didn't stop the two boys, and now Harry, from having yet another discussion about the subject.

Neville hid his irritation as the three boys walked ahead, leaving him with Susan and Hermione. Hermione, however, had seen Neville's face tighten momentarily. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Neville was short with Hermione with his response. "I'm heading off to the Gryffindor common room. I have homework to get done."

"See you later." Hermione let Neville leave, and she continued her conversation with Susan.

Later that night, lying in bed, Justin was tossing the snitch into the air and catching it before it could escape, and he decided to question Harry about his feelings now that his first match was over. "So what do you think about quidditch now that you've played your first game and won the match for Hufflepuff?"

Harry wanted to say that he didn't care about it. But he knew he'd be lying. "I loved it."

"So will you try out next year?" Justin shot up and caught the snitch just as it threatened to escape his grasp.

"If you will." Harry rolled over to face Justin. "You're pretty good at catching that thing yourself."

"I don't think my flying is quite up to yours." Justin protested as he yet again performed an almost impossible catch.

Harry couldn't help but notice how fast Justin's reactions were, but he was also aware that Justin's flying abilities weren't quite as good as his. "I'll help you. With practice you'd be really good." Harry was excited at the prospect and he sat up. "So what do you think?"

Justin couldn't deny that the idea of playing quidditch appealed to him. "But I don't want to go up against you."

"We need another reserve seeker." Harry thought Cedric was good but personally felt that the boy would make a better chaser. "And it would free Cedric up to be the sole reserve for chaser."

"And what happens if Cedric beats us to become seeker next year?" Justin brought up a possibility that could happen.

"Then we cheer him on." Harry wasn't going to let a petty rivalry taint his newly discovered love of quidditch.

"Okay then." Justin popped the snitch into his drawer and closed it firmly on the little golden missile. "I think we'd better get some sleep now though. Snape will have our guts for garters if we mess up again tomorrow."

"Don't remind me." Harry had recently spent several uncomfortable hours scrubbing out cauldrons by hand when his potion had exploded over him and Justin. "Goodnight."

"Night, Harry." Justin called out.

Soon silence reigned over the room.

Justin climbed off Harry's broom, his face glowing with excitement. "That was brilliant, Harry."

"I told you you'd be good." Harry span around as his name was called. "Ron, what's up?"

"It's Hagrid." Ron was panting heavily, having run back from the groundskeeper's hut. "I think he's up to no good."

Justin snorted out loud. "Hagrid?"

"Yes, Hagrid." Ron hated being questioned. "I dropped by because I wanted to ask him about Scabbers."

"Scabbers?" Justin queried the comment.

"My pet rat." Ron held out a rather fat and tired looking rat. "He's been a little off his food, and I thought that perhaps Hagrid could help. But when I tried to get him to let me in, he barely opened the door, and the place inside was like an inferno."

"Perhaps he's cold." Harry suggested.

"Hagrid feeling the cold? I doubt that." Susan had seen the big man in his shirt sleeves in the snow. "I bet he's hiding something."

"He is. When I kept trying to look around him, he tried to block my vision, and I couldn't see what was inside." Ron explained. "Well, not till Fang knocked something over and Hagrid turned around."

"What did Fang knock over?" Justin asked, more than a little intrigued.

"The pot was that balancing on the side of the fireplace." Ron had followed Hagrid into his hut then. "And guess what was in the pot."

"His dinner?" Harry hazarded a stab at the pot's contents.

"No, an egg." Ron's voice was full of excitement.

"But couldn't that have been his dinner?" Justin couldn't see why Ron was so animated.

"Not unless he's eating a dragon's egg." Ron announced triumphantly. "I've seen them before when Charlie brought home some books on dragons. Hagrid has a dragon's egg."

"That's insane." Harry couldn't forget that his overly large friend desired a dragon.

"I know. He can't keep a dragon in his hut." Ron knew a lot about them from Charlie. "And I'm almost sure that that was definitely a Romanian Longhorn, and they grow to be huge."

"Wasn't that the type of egg that was stolen from Charlie's reserve?" Harry was almost sure it was.

Ron nodded. "Yeah, but I don't think Hagrid would take it."

"Neither do I." Harry then sat quietly as he thought over the problem. He didn't want to "tell" on Hagrid but he also knew that with all good conscience he couldn't ignore the problem either. "I think we have to get Hagrid to go to Professor Dumbledore."

"About what?" Hermione asked, having only just arrived from the library.

Ron filled her in on what he'd discovered. "So Harry thinks we should try and get Hagrid to go to the Headmaster."

"I agree with Harry then." Hermione declared, flashing Harry a bright smile.

So it was decided that Harry would go and speak to Hagrid. While he did so, Justin and Ron took turns practicing on Harry's broom while the absentee headed off to Hagrid's hut to try and talk some sense into the man. And Susan and Hermione chatted together, leaving Neville to sit and watch Ron and Justin encouraging each other to go faster.

A fed up Neville was about to leave when Harry returned from trying to speak to Hagrid. "He won't give up the egg. I told him to tell Professor Dumbledore but he's refusing."

"Then what are we going to do?" Neville finally joined in the conversation. "Hagrid can't be allowed to keep that egg. I think we should tell someone."

"No." Harry immediately shook his head. "I don't want to get Hagrid into trouble."

Susan came up with a sensible suggestion. "Why don't you write to Charlie and tell him? If it's the egg that was taken from his dragon perhaps he can help us."

When all the children but Neville, who still believed that they should tell a teacher, agreed on this course of action, Harry headed inside to pen a letter to Charlie.

Charlie grabbed the letter he'd received from Harry, and headed to see the woman in charge of the reserve. "Tula, I have a problem."

Tula put down the burn paste she'd just finished applying to her hand, and listened to Charlie's tale. "You believe that this Hagrid stole the egg?"

"While I'm only guessing that this is the same egg that was stolen from Dravina, I know for certain that Hagrid would never have done it." Charlie held up the letter Harry had written. "And I believe that what Harry wrote, that Hagrid won the egg off a stranger in the pub, is the truth. And that our mysterious stranger..." Here Charlie looked back at the letter "...who kept their face covered, was the one who stole the egg."

"Then I suggest we go collect our egg before it hatches." Tula decided.

As it turned out they were too late. Harry received a brief note from Hagrid later that day, and he shared the news with his friends. "Hagrid said it's hatching."

After lessons Harry and his friends all piled into Hagrid's hut to observe the miniature dragon that was trying to blow smoke. "It's hard to believe that this will grow up to be so scary."

"It's kind of cute." Susan tickled the dragon under the chin making it sneeze and blow mini flames towards her.

Ron brushed away the sparks that landed on Susan's arm. "It's not cute when you're on fire though."

"He doesn't mean any 'arm." Hagrid picked up the dragon like a baby and began to rub its tummy. "Do you, Roger?"

"Roger?" Justin couldn't believe he'd heard right. "You're calling a vicious dragon 'Roger'?"

"He's not vicious." Hagrid cooed at the dragon, which surprisingly seemed to like the sound and make small clicking sounds in his throat as he snuggled closer to Hagrid's bulk and warmth.

"I think he thinks that you're his mother." Ron could see that the baby dragon wasn't the slightest bit frightened of Hagrid, and instead seemed to be reveling in the close contact.

"Well, I am now." Hagrid rocked the dragon gently; it had now closed its eyes and little puffs of smoke had started coming from its nostrils as it slipped into a deep sleep.

"We should tell one of the teachers." Neville, who'd said little up until then, piped up. "He might hurt someone."

"You can't do that." Justin hissed at the Gryffindor. "At the moment Roger is hurting no-one."

Neville subsided as the other children continued to observe the now sleeping Roger.

Harry was woken up by Hedwig pecking his shoulder. "Geroff."

Hedwig ignored Harry's order and continued pecking him. Harry sat up. "What is it?" Hedwig hooted softly, reminding Harry it was time to get up. "Justin, Justin, wake up."

"Too early." Justin rolled over and attempted to bury himself under the covers.

Climbing out of bed to pull on his clothes, Harry turned to his familiar. "Hedwig, wake Justin up."

Justin's slumber came to an abrupt end when a sharp beak connected with the tender skin of his neck. "I'm up. I'm up."

Hedwig hooted in a manner that could only be described as a laugh before she flew off towards the hole where she'd gained access. Harry laced up his boots. "It's time to go. The note said that Charlie would be here at midnight, and it's almost that now."

Justin's sleepiness fled and he hurried to get dressed. "Don't go without me."

"I'd have left you sleeping if I was going to do that." Harry waited impatiently for Justin to finish, and then both boys rushed out of the dormitory leaving their two still sleeping roommates behind.

Ron was waiting for them near the entrance. "Let's go."

Once they reached Hagrid's hut, Harry hung back shyly as Ron greeted his brother. His shyness vanished when he too was pulled into a bear hug. "Hi."

"Normally I'd tell you all off for being out of bed at this time of the night, especially as you didn't need to be here." Charlie warned even as he smiled. "But because you're doing it for a good reason, I'm willing to let it go this time."

"We don't normally do this sort of thing." Harry promised. "It's just that we didn't know what else to do about Hagrid. We didn't want to tell a teacher."

"Neville did." Justin butted in.

"Where is he?" Charlie noted that there were just the three boys.

"He was feeling a little sick, so he decided to stay behind." Ron explained Neville's absence. "He spent ages in the toilets before I came here."

Not really interested in Neville's malady, Charlie promptly dismissed the boy from his mind, instead citing why he and his companion had flown all the way to Hogwarts with a large basket between them, just in case the egg hatched on the return journey. Portkeying unfortunately made Tula ill, and so they'd ended up taking longer to

get there than would normally have been the case. "We need to get a look at this egg."

It was then that Harry noticed the woman standing in the shadows, and he politely held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter. And this is Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ron Weasley."

"Tula Buscan." The woman's eyebrows rose up as she shook hands with all three boys, and she commented on the discovery of whom Charlie was friends with. "Charlie, you didn't tell me that 'Harry' was actually Harry Potter."

"I didn't think it was important." Charlie knew how much Harry would be pleased to hear that.

Harry was. "This isn't about me. It's about Hagrid and the baby dragon."

"Baby dragon?" Tula realized that their prize was no longer just an egg. "When did it hatch?"

"Three days ago." Ron revealed. "Hagrid called it Roger."

"We'd better go see Hagrid alone." Charlie decided that he wanted the boys back in bed, and not in the range of a dragon, not even a baby one. "You three head back to your houses."

"But can't we come with you?" Harry wanted to spend more time with Charlie.

"You're not supposed to be here, and I think we can take it from here." Charlie was firm. "Now off to bed."

Harry was hugged by Charlie once again. "Write and tell me how Roger is."

"I will." Charlie promised before moving onto hug Ron. "Well done, Ron. But you've done your bit, so I want you lot out of here. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"kay." Ron was pleased with his brother's praise, and he waited for Justin to shake hands with Charlie and Tula before the three boys

headed back to the school, Harry's invisibility cloak just covering all three of them.

And they had never been so glad of the cloak as they were at the moment when they reached the school. They'd barely taken a step inside when they spotted Minerva McGonagall heading their way. Flattening themselves against the wall, the three boys held their breath while she marched by.

Harry waited until she'd moved out of earshot. "What was she doing out here?"

"I bet she was looking for you, Ron." Justin came to the only conclusion he could.

"She must have found me out of bed." Ron was close to panicking. "What am I going to do?"

Recalling what Ron had said about Neville's absence, Justin came up with the answer. "Go to the hospital wing and say that you feel unwell. You can explain the time difference if anyone asks by saying you stopped at the boys' toilets to be sick."

"But I'll get dosed up with some disgusting potion." Ron had had this happen already after eating too much candy at Halloween.

"It's better than the alternative." Harry glanced behind him to where Minerva had vanished into the darkness.

Ron sighed in defeat. "I'll see you tomorrow then." He then headed off in the direction of the infirmary.

Not wanting to get caught out of bed, Harry and Justin both hurried back to Hufflepuff, and soon the two of them were undressed and back in bed. After whispering their goodnights, the two boys closed their eyes.

As the boys headed indoors, Minerva McGonagall headed down to Hagrid's hut, muttering to herself about anonymous notes, and how this had better not be a waste of her time. Not finding anyone there, she eventually came upon Charlie and a woman she didn't know close to the gates leading out of the school. "A little late for a social call, isn't it, Mr. Weasley?"

"Professor!" Charlie turned quickly. He was more than a little surprised to see Minerva. "What are you doing here?"

"I received a note telling me that I'd find Harry Potter, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and your youngest brother out here." Minerva tartly informed Charlie. "So are they here?"

"No." Charlie answered truthfully.

"So why is Ronald missing from his room?" Minerva asked.

"Perhaps you should ask him." Charlie avoided answering the question. "What about Harry and Justin? Are they missing as well?"

"I haven't checked on them." Minerva hadn't stopped to find out if they were missing as well. "So tell me, have you seen them?"

"These missing boys are not my concern." Tula butted in, her anxiety over the dragon's welfare outweighing Minerva's hunt for the boys. She also had no intention of giving up the three young boys who'd been good enough to reunite her with a precious absentee. "My concern is that we need to get this baby dragon back to its mother."

It was only then that Minerva noted the large cage that was rattling ominously. "You have a dragon in there?"

"She's a newborn." Tula patted the cage making the dragon inside snort. "And right now she needs the warmth and comfort of her mother."

Minerva could only think of one person who'd harbor a baby dragon. Glancing back across the grounds towards Hagrid's hut, she asked the obvious question. "Did Hagrid have her?"

"That doesn't matter." Charlie, like Harry, wasn't going to incriminate Hagrid, even though he knew that Minerva probably had put two and two together and come up with four. "Sorry, Professor, but we do have to go."

"I'll see you during the summer then, Mr. Weasley." Minerva watched as the pair lifted up into the air on broomsticks, the cage

precariously balanced between them. Soon they vanished into the dark of the night.

When Minerva arrived back at the school, it was to find that Ron's bed was still empty. Frowning, she headed out of the dormitory, and towards Hufflepuff. After gaining entry to the common room, she made her way to the first year boys' dormitory, where she entered to find all four boys sleeping soundly in their beds. Minerva didn't bother to wake the two boys she'd gone to question.

With Ron still missing, Minerva's last port of call ended up being the infirmary where she immediately spotted a sleepy looking Ron tucked up in bed. "Mr. Weasley, are you feeling unwell?"

"Shh." Poppy came rushing over. "I have more patients than just Mr. Weasley in here. He came in about fifteen minutes ago complaining that he'd been sick and that he had an upset stomach. I've given him a stomach potion, and I'm going to keep him in overnight."

"I still need to speak to him." Minerva threw up a privacy bubble. "Mr. Weasley, I checked on you half an hour ago. Where were you?"

"I didn't feel well so I started to come here but I had to stop off to be sick." Ron stuck to the prearranged story.

It worked. Minerva let out a long breath. "I thought you'd been up to mischief."

"I think we can both see he hasn't been." Poppy led Minerva away to allow Ron to get some sleep. "So why were you up so late?"

"Do you have a pot of tea we could share?" Minerva was now wide awake, and knew it would be some time before she would settle down to sleep.

"You know very well I have." Poppy led the way into her office, and the two women began to chat about Ron, the note and Minerva's late night expedition.

In his bed in the Gryffindor tower, Neville wondered what had happened to Ron. He'd been awake when Minerva had checked both times, but he'd expected Ron to come back. Neville was to spend most of the night fretting about what had happened to his

friend. For while he hadn't wanted to get his friend into trouble, he'd hoped that Minerva's interference would have made Ron see how much trouble being friends with Harry was, and that he, Neville, was a far better choice.

It would, however, be morning before he found out what had happened to his friend, and that his ploy had failed.

Next Chapter: Neville's jealousy grows. Harry finds himself in a sticky situation he had no plans to be part of.

Chapter 14: The Forbidden Forest

The next morning the children all met up, Ron looking tired and grumpy. Hermione took pity on him. "You look terrible."

"So would you if you'd been woken up every few hours to get dosed with some nasty medicine." With that comment, Ron glared at Justin.

"Sorry," Justin apologized. "But I didn't know what else to do."

"So what happened last night?" Neville asked in a quiet voice.

"We almost ran into McGonagall," Ron began.

"How?" Susan interrupted.

"Well..." Ron explained what had happened, and at the end of his recitation he grinned brightly at Harry. "I'm just glad that Harry had his cloak with him."

Neville was relieved that no-one had figured out the truth about who had slipped the note under Minerva's door, but he was also dismayed that Ron's obvious adulation of Harry had intensified. "At least it's over now."

The children agreed, and soon school settled back into its usual routine. However, for Harry things were going to take a frightening turn.

It was almost dark when Harry called an end to the final practice that he would be able to hold before Hufflepuff's match with Slytherin. Justin had volunteered to help, as had Ron. And up until Ron had to leave to finish his potions homework, Harry had let the two boys take turns to use his broomstick, while he used a school broom. Now it was solely Justin versus Harry with Harry letting Justin use the better broom but with Harry still easily beating his roommate to the snitch. "I've finished for tonight. It's starting to get too dark to see properly. Let's head inside."

Justin was about to turn when he spotted a black shape heading into the Forbidden Forest. "Harry, look at that."

By the time Harry had turned to look at where Justin was pointing, the shape had merged into the darkness of the Forest. "What?"

"I thought I saw someone or something heading into the Forest," Justin explained.

"Do you think it was Snape?" Harry and his friends hadn't been able to find anything to suggest that the unpleasant potions master was aiding You-Know-Who or anyone else to find the Stone.

"I just saw a black shape," Justin couldn't say for definite that it was Snape.

"I'm going to fly over the Forest," Harry decided. "Before it gets really dark."

"Then I'm coming with you," Justin followed Harry as his friend led the way.

Once over the top of the Forest looking down, it was almost impossible to see what was inside but Harry suddenly spotted a movement, and he realized that the shape was indeed a man. Not saying anything, he pointed downwards, letting Justin know that he'd located their prey.

Justin was about to follow Harry when suddenly Harry's broomstick began to buck and sway. "Harry, hold on."

"I can't," Not wearing his usual gloves, Harry's fingers were slipping off the school broomstick, which had been polished to an unusually high degree.

"I'm coming to get you," Justin flew towards Harry.

Harry screamed out as Justin's own broomstick began to waver. "Get back."

"But you'll fall," Justin had, however, had the good sense to withdraw.

"Get help," Harry couldn't say anything else as he finally relinquished his grip on his broomstick, bounced on the canopy of

the tree beneath him, and then disappeared from Justin's sight into the darkness below.

Torn between going to help his friend or rushing back to the school, Justin did as Harry had asked and headed back towards the school, tucked low over Harry's Nimbus 2000 as he tried to garner as much speed from it as he could.

On the ground, Harry lay winded for a moment. Then, hearing a rustling sound, he quickly rolled over and dove into a bush to his left. Unfortunately for Harry it was a prickly bush but he managed to keep quiet, even though what felt like a million small sharp pinpricks had pierced his skin. The figure the two boys had spotted walked briskly into the area where Harry was hiding. Harry held his breath, trying to keep as quiet as possible.

As for the man who'd caused Harry to lose his fight to stay on his broomstick, he knew that Harry had come down somewhere close but he could see no sign of the meddlesome boy. Aiming his wand in the general direction of where he believed Harry was, the man called out in a low, rasping voice, "Accio Harry Potter."

Harry fortunately had almost immediately figured out what was going to happen, and had hurriedly wrapped his arms and legs around the thick central post of the bush, forcing the needles deeper into his skin, and almost making him cry out. Harry desperately held on as the spell hit him, and it seemed to Harry as if his arms were going to rip out of his sockets as he clung urgently to the bush. Suddenly the pulling motion ended, and Harry was able to relax as the figure moved his wand away from Harry and in a circular action. Harry made sure to hold on tight once again as the figure completed his circle but this time the pull wasn't as forceful. And Harry sagged in relief when the unknown man gave up.

The man then cast a spell Harry couldn't catch properly, and before long into the moonlit clearing there came a pure white beast. Harry's relief turned to horror, and he wanted to scream out to the unicorn to run but fear clogged his throat. As he watched, the creature stepped closer to the black cloaked figure, before it finally knelt down and lowered its head, its horn almost touching the ground. The black cloaked man then also sank to his knees, and knowing what was about to happen to the ethereal creature, Harry finally found his voice. "NO!"

The spell was immediately broken, and the unicorn shook itself as it rose to its feet, and then ran out of the clearing. The man whom Harry had thwarted turned around to face the bush that Harry's cry had come from. "Potter, I know you're in there."

Harry stayed silent hoping that the figure would leave him alone if he believed that he'd gotten Harry's location wrong. Harry's prayers sadly went unanswered; the figure cast yet another summoning spell. This one, however, was far more powerful than the previous one, and despite his best efforts, Harry was torn out of the prickly bush, landing at the feet of the spell caster, who smiled to himself inside his cloaked hood. "Potter, how nice of you to join me."

"You're... you're..." Harry could barely get his words out, his teeth were chattering so hard with fear.

"I'm what?" The voice remained low and raspy but this time it was definitely tinged with amusement.

"Him!" Harry managed to get out.

"That's quite a stunning revelation. I'm him," The voice had become mocking, before barking out an order. "Get to your feet, boy."

Harry's legs refused to obey, and he remained in a heap on the floor. The man shook his head. "It's so sad that the supposed savior of the wizarding world is a coward who is going to die at my feet. Do you think the world would believe in you if they could see you like this?"

The man began to withdraw his wand, and Harry closed his eyes and began to sing softly to himself, trying to block out what was about to happen to him. However his attacker didn't get any further than the word "avada" when the bushes burst apart, and a golden haired creature leapt into the clearing. By the time Harry had garnered up enough courage to reopen his eyes, it was to find that the dark-cloaked figure had gone, and that he was now alone in the clearing. Scrambling to his feet, his legs shaking horribly as he did so, Harry turned to leave, although he wasn't entirely sure of which direction to go. He jumped when, after leaving the clearing, a voice interrupted his ponderings. "You are the child of prophecy, are you not?"

Harry looked around trying to locate the owner of the voice. As he did so, the same gold colored creature that had entered the clearing moved into the moonlight. Harry immediately recognized him as being a centaur but because he had had his eyes closed, he had no idea that this centaur had saved his life. "Sorry, Sir. But I don't understand."

"My name is Firenze, man child," The blond haired centaur introduced himself, but didn't explain his first comment.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry returned the courtesy, before making a hopeful request. "Can you tell me how to get back to Hogwarts?"

"It is in yonder direction," The centaur pointed the way. "I will guide you."

The pair of them hadn't gone far when a thundering sound of hooves became apparent, and a voice that was full of authority demanded that they stop. "Firenze, get away from the accursed one."

"Me?" Harry's voice came out in a squeak when he suddenly found himself surrounded by five large centaurs, and he backed closer to Firenze.

"Be silent, young one," Firenze hushed Harry up. "Bane, this is the human child prophesied to lead us to salvation."

"It does not matter who he is supposed to be. His hands are awash with blood," The large black centaur responded. "He is not welcome here. These lands are sacred."

Harry swallowed hard and wondered what the centaur meant by his comment about the blood. Harry said nothing, however, and Firenze moved to stand in front of him. "The stars say..."

"I too can read them," The black centaur snapped. "But either he leaves or dies. There will be no second chances."

Harry was by now starting to get very frightened, and he felt relieved when Firenze placed a hand on his shoulder in a protective gesture. "Then I will lead him away from our lands."

"You are too soft," The opposing centaur growled.

"I merely seek to protect what is ours," Firenze responded in placatory tone. "And I believe that making sure that the child of prophecy has left the Forest will best achieve that."

"I..." Bane got no further when yet another centaur joined the group.

This centaur's body was covered in red hair. "Firenze, take the boy and go."

Harry was surprised when Bane said nothing further, and he smiled briefly at the new arrival, but wisely said nothing.

Firenze then spoke to Harry again. "Come, Harry Potter."

Harry followed Firenze, his heart beating fast, aware they were being watched by the large centaurs. He was glad when Firenze spoke to him again. "You can relax now."

Harry let out the breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding. "Thank you."

"You are almost safe," Firenze could see the edge of the Forest. "And it looks as though you will have an escort."

Harry's eyes weren't as used to the dark as his companion's, and he had to struggle to see what he meant. Harry's legs again became wobbly when he recognized the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout just about to enter the Forest. "Over here," Harry's voice sounded tinny to him as he called out.

A bright light appeared, the result of a spell being cast by Albus, and Harry turned to the centaur. "Thank you, Sir."

"Be safe, Harry Potter. And keep out of this Forest," Firenze warned. He didn't stop to speak to the teachers, and instead turned and headed back into the Forest.

"Harry, you're covered in blood," Pomona was puffing a little when she spoke, the result of having ran most of the way to try and keep up with Albus and Minerva, both of whom had walked a great deal quicker than one would have expected at their ages.

"It's from a bush," Harry hurriedly explained. "I hid in it but it was rather prickly."

"Hid from what, Harry?" Albus waved his wand over Harry before lowering it again.

"From someone," Harry felt silly now that he had to explain who he thought he'd seen.

"I think we should get Mr. Potter cleaned up and checked over by Madam Pomfrey," Minerva said firmly, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Then we can question him."

Half an hour after leaving the Forest, Harry had showered, changed into pajamas and was now tucked up in a private room in the hospital wing. "Thanks, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey took the empty mug that had contained hot chocolate away from Harry. "I'm going to keep you here overnight but there's nothing much wrong with you except for a slightly elevated blood pressure. No doubt a result of your experience in the Forest."

"Probably," Harry had half-expected to die of fright, so Madam Pomfrey's comment rang true.

Harry had barely lain back against the pillows when Minerva and Albus came into his room. "Hello."

"I see that Madam Pomfrey has taken good care of you," Albus noted that Harry's numerous pinpricks of blood had vanished, together with any evidence of the bush.

"She has, Sir," Harry agreed with the headmaster. "I suppose you want to talk about what happened."

"I do," Albus confirmed. "So start at the beginning."

Still feeling a little embarrassed, Harry explained exactly why he and Justin had flown over the Forest, and the upshot of their actions. He finished sounding more than a little sheepish, "...and I really don't know what might have happened if Firenze hadn't rescued me and shown me the way back."

"I am surprised he did so. There are more centaurs like Bane than there are like Firenze," Albus stroked his beard as he thought. "But Firenze is known to Hagrid, and he is more tolerant of humans than the others."

"He was nice," Harry had been a little taken aback by the centaur but he most definitely hadn't been as rude or frightening as the large dark centaur Bane had been. And Bane's words had caused Harry some worry, and he therefore had several questions about what the centaur had said. "Sir, what did Bane mean when he said that my hands were blood soaked and that I was the accursed one? Did he mean that I killed my parents and Jamie, and that I'm a bad person because of it?"

"I do not know but I believe so," Albus confirmed Harry's theory before continuing. "But as I said before, you are not to blame for any of their deaths, no matter what Bane told you. And you are not a bad person."

"Sir, they almost seemed frightened of me," Despite his fear at the time, Harry had observed that the centaurs with Bane had not met Harry's eyes, all four of them standing behind their apparent leader. "Well, except for Firenze, and whoever the other centaur was."

Albus guessed it had to be have been Magorian, the leader of the centaurs, but didn't mention this to Harry, nor did he comment on Harry's observation. "Well I'm glad that you had at least one friend in the Forest; a forest you shouldn't have gone into no matter what you believed was happening," Albus' expression became stern. "Which leads me to the subject of Professor Snape and the Philosopher's Stone."

Minerva joined in with the conversation. "Harry, you were correct in believing that the Stone is hidden in the school. But you can rest assured that it is safe, and that Professor Snape is one of those teachers who is helping to keep it that way."

"But..." Harry began to protest.

"Harry, just because you dislike someone, or you dislike their methods of teaching," Albus stopped to take a breath, "doesn't mean that they are evil or aiding Voldemort's spirit."

Harry still thought that Snape was evil, no matter what Albus said. "So who do you think was in the Forest tonight? Do you think he was helping You-Know-Who?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea," Albus admitted to his ignorance of who it could have been. "But he may have been. So in future you will steer clear of the Forest, you will not follow Professor Snape or anyone else around, and under no circumstances will you attempt to discover where the Stone is being held. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry didn't mention that he already had an idea of where the Stone was being held.

"Good," Albus stood up. "I'm glad to see that you survived your ordeal, but in future please try and refrain from meddling in matters that do not concern you."

"Yes, Sir," Harry repeated. "Sorry, Sir."

"Don't dwell on it," Albus responded gently, seeing how pale Harry had become again. "And try to get some sleep."

"But do you think that whatever is in the Forest will come after me?" Harry wasn't willing to let Albus leave without finding out what the Headmaster thought.

"I cannot say no because I do not know what they want or what they are thinking," Albus' words weren't entirely reassuring. "But I will do everything I can to keep you safe."

"Thank you, Sir," Harry gave a little shiver as he recalled what had happened, before bidding the Headmaster goodnight.

"We will discuss this during our Wednesday night chat, Mr. Potter," Minerva's formal tone left Harry in no doubt that she was angry with him for what he had done. "And you will also serve a detention with me prior to that for leaving the grounds without permission. The same goes for Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

Harry drooped visibly but didn't argue, and as he had with the Headmaster, he bid his guardian goodnight before lying back on his pillows, and trying to get some sleep. The match against Slytherin

was in two days' time, and he wanted to be as fresh as possible for it.

Ron's delighted yell erupted just before the remainder of the school joined him with their cheers. Well, the remainder of the school bar Slytherin was cheering. As for Harry, he was currently lying flat on his back looking up at the sky, a fluttering snitch held firmly between his fingers; the snitch being the reason for most of the cheering. However, at that moment, on the quidditch there was little cheering going on. Instead screamed protests were being made by the Slytherin team that it was unfair, and the catch should be disallowed. On the opposite side, Hufflepuff were arguing just as vociferously that it was a good catch, and that they had at least won fair and square.

Both teams were silenced by Madam Hooch, who was about to upset Slytherin. For Mara had no intention of disallowing Harry's catch, having decided that Harry was only in the position he was in thanks to Slytherin's beaters, who'd literally forced Harry into the ground. She therefore turned and faced James Llewellyn, one of the Slytherin chasers. "The catch is legal, Mr. Llewellyn."

"But..." Llewellyn was red in the face, anger blighting his usually good-looking features.

"Mr. Potter remained in contact with his broomstick despite his unfortunate 'accident'," Mara's voice reflected her disbelief that it had been an accident, before she continued. "And Mr. Potter was still in contact with it when he acquired the snitch."

"He was on the ground," Llewellyn more or less screamed.

"My decision stands," Mara stole a glance at the teachers' box. Severus Snape had a cold, imperceptible look on his face. Knowing him as she did though, Mara could almost feel Severus' disgust all the way from the teachers' box. And she knew that her decision had angered him. "Hufflepuff wins 170 to 90."

Turning angrily to look at his head of house, only after seeing a tiny shake of Severus' head did Llewellyn finally stalk furiously off, indicating with a wave of his hand for his team mates to join him. They would have to speak to their head of house later.

While Madam Hooch and countless others had been happy to see Hufflepuff win, Neville was one of the few who were non-Slytherins who was not overjoyed. And he bit down his continuing dismay as Harry handed the snitch to Ron. "Here."

"Really?" Ron could barely believe that Harry was simply going to hand over his precious winning snitch.

"I thought you might like it," Harry was grinning from ear to ear at Ron's look of delight.

Taking the snitch from Harry, Ron was ecstatic. "This is the snitch that beat Slytherin for the first time in years."

"Yeah, but they're still probably going to win the Quidditch Cup," Harry reminded Ron. "They play dirty, and have far too many points for Gryffindor to catch. Well, not unless something goes horribly wrong for Slytherin."

"I bet we'd have won the Cup this year if you'd been on our side," Fred lamented. "Why couldn't you have gotten into Gryffindor?"

Harry shrugged apologetically. "Sorry!"

The adoration continued, and Neville thought he was going to be sick. As far as Neville was concerned, Harry had gotten lucky that day. Unable to stand and listen to everyone fawning around Harry, he walked off. Only Hermione noticed, and she nudged Ron. "What's up with Neville?"

"Dunno," Ron barely gave his departing friend a backward glance, instead launching into a retelling of Harry's amazing catch, even though everyone had seen it moments ago, and Harry had lived it.

Hermione, however, was worried about Neville, and she headed after him, catching up with him just before he entered the Gryffindor common room. "Neville, what's wrong?"

Neville was surprised to see that anyone had noticed him leaving. "Nothing. I just wanted to get a head start on my defense homework."

"Would you like any help?" Having put it off to attend the quidditch match, Hermione hadn't started her own either.

Neville was about to say no when he decided that it might be nice for him to get a little help for once. It didn't occur to him that if he'd simply asked Hermione outright, she would have said yes. "Thank you."

The two of them headed into Gryffindor to collect their books, and then set out for the library. Once there, Neville took out his books, but he didn't open them. "Hermione, do you really like quidditch?"

Hermione was a little taken aback by the question. "It's okay."

"But you go to all the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff matches," Neville pointed out.

"Harry and the twins are my friends," Hermione tried hard not to go red as she thought about the real reason she went to see Gryffindor. "It's only polite to go and watch the matches."

"So you don't really like quidditch then?" Neville persevered with the subject.

"Not really," Hermione admitted.

"Neither do I," Neville now felt confident enough to share his feelings with Hermione. "In fact I hate it, and I think that its full of people who just want to show off."

Hermione was a little stunned by the venom in Neville's voice. "Harry and the twins don't. In fact I'd say that it's probably only Slytherin who do that."

"That's who I meant," Neville immediately backpedaled, and pointed to his book. "Perhaps I'd better get started on this."

Hermione, however, wasn't going to let him off the hook that quickly. "Neville, it's okay not to like quidditch, or is it more than that?"

"I don't know what you mean," Neville's face burned.

Hermione tried to find a tactful way of asking whether Neville hated quidditch because he was such an awful flyer. "Is it because you don't like flying?"

"A little." Neville was relieved that Hermione hadn't realized that Neville's dislike went deeper than that. "I just get a little fed up when everyone talks about it all the time."

Hermione smiled in consolation. "Ron does go on about quidditch a lot, doesn't he?"

Neville smiled back gratefully. "Yeah, he does."

"I get fed up with hearing it sometimes as well," Hermione revealed, trying to make Neville feel better. "But please don't tell anyone that."

"Your secret is safe with me," Neville promised. "And you won't tell Ron either what I said, will you?"

"Of course not," Hermione shared another smile with Neville. "It will be our little secret."

"Great," A somewhat happier Neville turned his attention back to his work.

But later that night as he lay in bed listening to Ron opine in length about Harry and how spectacular he'd been, Neville found his earlier jealousy resurfacing. "You really like Harry, don't you?"

"He's brilliant," Ron gushed, totally unaware of his friend's dislike of Harry. "And he gave me the winning snitch."

Neville didn't need reminding. Ron had already mentioned the fact at least ten times to him, and continually to anyone else willing to listen. "Ron, do you want a game of chess tomorrow?" Neville was notoriously bad at the game and hated it but he wanted some of Ron's attention turned on him.

"Sorry. Can't mate," Ron apologized. "I'm going down to the quidditch pitch. Harry said I could use his broom again."

"But you were on it a few days ago." Neville pointed out.

"I know that," Ron unnecessarily pointed out. "But it's a Nimbus 2000, and if I want to make the team next year, I need all the practice on a decent broom I can get."

"You want to play quidditch?" Neville's voice came out choked when he realized that if this happened, Ron would drift even further away from him.

"Who wouldn't?" Ron couldn't imagine that his friend would rather much do anything other than that. "Why don't you come down with us?"

"Us?" Neville queried the terminology.

"Justin, Seamus and Dean are going," Ron answered blithely.

Neville was beyond hurt that Ron hadn't thought to ask him before then. "Oh."

Ron finally twigged that Neville might be upset. "I thought you knew."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Neville brushed off Ron's excuse. "I have homework I'd forgotten about anyway."

"Didn't you finish it all with Hermione?" Ron had been surprised when he'd learnt that the two Gryffindors had been studying together.

"There's still some stuff I haven't done," Neville lied. "I'm going to sleep. Goodnight, Ron."

"Night, Nev." Ron rolled over and within minutes was snoring happily.

Neville however was lying awake, and seething. He didn't want to share Ron with Harry or anyone else for that matter. Neville was of the opinion that Harry already had enough friends, and now it looked as though he was about to gain even more. It was then that Neville made up his mind that Harry wasn't taking Ron off him. And as he lay awake into the small hours, he came up with a plan as to how to regain Ron's friendship, and hopefully Ron's admiration. It was a plan that, when he put it into practice, was going to cause Harry and several others a great deal of pain that they hadn't expected to receive.

Next Chapter: Harry finally shows what he's made of.

Chapter 15: Lord Voldemort

Ron had no idea what had awoken him until a bright flash filled the room followed by the ominous roar of thunder. He was about to draw the curtains around his bed to encapsulate him in darkness when Ron spotted an envelope with his name on. Reaching out, he grabbed it, and by the light of his wand ripped it open and read the note contained inside. The contents caused Ron's tiredness to flee, and he glanced across the room. Neville's bed was empty.

George groaned as a hand shook him. "Go 'way."

"George, wake up," Ron repeated, and shook his brother harder.

George came fully awake. "What's wrong, Ron?"

"Neville's gone after the Stone," Ron hurriedly blurted out. "I have to go after him."

"He's done what?" George sat up.

"Look," Ron passed over the note, which George began to read.

'Ron

I've gone to look for the Stone. I don't think Harry and the Headmaster were right about it being safe, and I believe that Snape is going after it. I can't bear the thought of that monster coming back, so I am going to do something about it.

If anyone asks where I am, just say that I'm sick or something. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Neville.'

"Why the hell would he go after the Stone alone?" George could barely believe that Neville had gone off on such an adventure by himself. "He knows very well that it's safe. Dumbledore would hardly lie."

"Well obviously Neville doesn't believe him because according to this he's gone after it," Ron took the letter back.

"Why didn't you fetch McGonagall?" George hissed, trying to keep his voice low so that he wouldn't wake his sleeping roommates.

"Because I'm going after Neville," Ron hissed back. "McGonagall's rooms are on the other side of the castle, and if I went over there first I might be too late to stop Neville. I've only told you because I wanted someone to know where I'd gone."

"Don't you dare go after him," George snapped. He knew that Ron had no idea of exactly how big that dog was that was guarding the trap door. "That Cerberus is mean, and you could get hurt."

"Then so could Neville. I have to try and stop him before he reaches it," Ron turned and headed towards the door. "If I don't come back within twenty minutes, fetch McGonagall."

George fumbled for his wand to stop Ron but he was too slow. "Dammit."

Climbing out of bed, he pulled on his clothes, and then shook Fred, who reacted in the same way he had. "Bugger off."

"Listen to me," George spoke in an urgent voice, shaking Fred hard to make sure that he was awake. "Ron and Neville have gone after the Stone. I'm going after them. Tell McGonagall what's happening."

Not giving his brother a chance to argue, George turned on his heel and followed in Ron's footsteps.

Harry was tiredly traipsing along the corridor when he spotted a familiar figure. Since it was almost two a.m., Harry was more than a little surprised to see George heading his way. "George, what are you doing out of bed?"

"Neville's gone after the Stone, and Ron's gone after him," George grabbed Harry's arm. "Come on. I might need you if they've been hurt."

Harry found himself being propelled up the stairs and onto the banned third floor. "Why don't you just tell McGonagall?" Harry yawned tiredly.

"I've told Fred to tell her what's happening. But Ron might need us before she can there," George could see the door at the end of the corridor was wide open. "Wand out, Harry."

Harry withdrew his wand, and cautiously followed George. When they reached the door, and looked inside the room that had housed the Cerberus, it was to find that the room was empty, and that the trap door had been pulled up. Harry perused the room, and spotted something that hadn't been there before. "George, why would anyone put a harp in a room with Fluffy?"

George immediately realized why. "To put the dog to sleep."

"Do you think it was Neville?" But even as he asked the question, Harry couldn't help but wonder where the dog had gone.

"I doubt it," George didn't have much faith in Neville's magical skills. "Where would he have gotten it from, and more importantly where's Fluffy now?" Suddenly a deep growling sound reached George's ears. "I should have just kept my mouth shut!"

Looking back the way they'd come, in the lightening lit corridor Harry could see the Cerberus heading their way. "One of them must have let it escape when they left the door open."

"Probably Ron. He's always doing it at home," George looked at the swiftly advancing Cerberus. "I don't think singing is going to work this time." He then glanced down at the black pitch of the hole, and his plan to send Harry to fetch a teacher, or to help him with Ron and Neville if things had gotten difficult, went out of the window. "Down there."

Harry looked down at the hole, and then back at the advancing dog. "You too."

"Right behind you," George pushed Harry into the hole, and jumped in right behind him. "Geronimo! Oof!" The second word escaped as George hit something soft and bouncy. "What is this?"

"I don't know," Harry lit his wand. "Crap. It's Devil's Snare."

"I think I know that now," George's arms and legs had already started to become entangled, and by the light of Harry's wand, he

could see that his friend was also being caught up in a similar manner. "Attack it!"

Being fond of herbology, and a favorite of Professor Sprout's, Harry had no problem in finding the right spell to deal with the plant, using one of Hermione's choice spells to deal with it. "Lacarnum Inflamarae."

Blue flames leapt from Harry's wand, and the plant immediately retracted, both boys being released and falling to the ground below. George groaned as he picked himself up. "Couldn't have thought of using a cushioning spell?"

"I didn't know it would do that," Harry hadn't actually thought much further than beyond getting the plant to release them. "I can't see Ron or Neville. You don't suppose the plant would have swallowed them, do you?" Harry began to use the light of his wand to survey the underside of the heaving mass of vegetation.

"You know as well as I do that Neville would have known how to deal with it," George knew that herbology was Neville's favorite subject, and the one thing the boy was probably the best at in his year. "I suspect that they've gone on."

"In that case we'd also better go that way," Harry pointed ahead to a small corridor. "We can't go back."

The two boys walked a little way down the dark and gloomy corridor until a strange sound reached their ears. Harry hesitated. "What's that?"

"No idea," George pushed ahead of Harry, and turned the corner. "It's birds, Harry."

"What are birds doing down here?" Harry queried, as he joined George.

The two boys watched the birds fluttering to and fro in the dim light that filled the cavernous room for a few moments before Harry gave a gasp. "It's not birds, George, it's flying keys!"

George looked closer and finally spotted what Harry had noticed. "So they are. What do you think we should do with them?"

"Catch them," Harry pointed to two broomsticks lying on the floor, "by using these." When Harry picked them up, the second broomstick revealed itself to be broken. "This one is useless. Only one of us can try and get a key."

"I'll do it," George offered.

"Okay," Harry handed over the broomstick, and watched as George tried to pin down the keys. As he walked around the room, something occurred to Harry. "George, there's a locked door down here. I think the key you want is a large one and probably silver."

"There are lots of silver ones," George yelled back, his voice echoing in the room.

"It's going to be old-fashioned," Harry judged after taking a closer look at the keyhole.

"I can't find it," George snapped after several minutes of looking, frustration beginning to make him angry.

"Let me try," Harry offered.

George landed beside Harry. "I should have let you do this first time; you are a seeker after all."

Harry grinned in the dim light. "I should have thought of that myself." Harry then climbed onto the broomstick, and after spending a few moments getting the feel of the unfamiliar broomstick, he lifted up into the air. And as he tried to hunt down the relevant key, he noticed a pattern. "These keys are flying in formation, as if they're trying to protect something."

"Like that key there," On the ground George was able to monitor the keys' movements far more easily than when trying to fly through them, and he pointed to a flock of keys to the left of Harry's head. "That one key has a bent wing, and is silver."

"I see it," Harry honed in the key, and as he did so, all of the other keys honed in on him. "This could be trouble. George, get to the door, and I'll fly down with the key."

George positioned himself in place, and held out his hand in readiness. Less than thirty seconds went by before Harry's hand wrapped itself around the slightly battered key, making it look even more unkempt as its wing crumpled further. "Catch."

George jumped up, grabbed the key, and then shoved it in the lock. "It's opening."

Avoiding the agitated keys that were still left in the air, Harry landed beside George, dropped the broomstick, and followed George into the next room. "How do you think Neville got the key?"

"I don't," George couldn't believe that Harry would ever consider that Neville was capable of flying that well. "I reckon Ron got it."

Whoever had gotten the key was forgotten when light suddenly filled the room they'd walked into. "Look at this!" Harry exclaimed.

George gasped at the sight of a giant chess set. "We're on a chessboard."

Harry touched one of the figures, and asked it a question. "How do we get past?" The figure stood to one side, allowing Harry to take its place.

"Perhaps we just ask and then walk across," George suggested as he began to do exactly that.

However their walk was cut short when they were challenged by the chess pieces on the opposite side. Harry shook his head. "Perhaps not. How about flying over them?"

George turned and went back to the door they'd come through. He tried the handle, shaking it but the door was now firmly locked again. "That's not going to work."

Harry had a feeling that there was only one way across. "So it looks as though we have to play our way across."

"Do you think we have to win or just get to the other side?" George asked, rejoining Harry on the center of the board.

"I'm thinking we have to win," Harry stared at the king with his sword who was blocking their way. "How good at chess are you?"

"Pretty decent but not nearly anywhere as good as Ron," George admitted. "How about you?"

"I've beaten Ron twice now," Harry announced proudly. "So it looks like it's going to be me. I wonder what we have to do."

When George touched a knight, it began to move away. "I think we take the place of the pieces. That's why they move when you touch them."

Debating his opening move and where they should stand, Harry rubbed his chin in thought before pointing to where he wanted George. "You should take the queen's spot because she's got the best defenses. I'm going to be the king."

George walked up to the queen and touched her. George took her place when she stepped aside. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I," Harry gave George a quick but very nervous grin, and took his own position, before beginning the game. "Pawn to D4."

And so the game commenced, the two boys discovering that this was the same as wizarding chess, the pieces demolishing their opponents when they were taken. More than once, Harry had to think quickly to stop George from being attacked, until finally Harry realized that he was going to win, finishing the game with exactly the same move he'd begun it with. "I've done it, George. When you reach your spot, it's checkmate," Harry then yelled out, "Queen to D4."

George moved into position, and in a relieved voice called out, "Checkmate."

Both boys jumped when the king dropped his sword, and marched off the board. Harry's legs began to shake with relief that it was over. "Are you alright?"

George was cradling his left arm. "A piece of that last knight caught me on the arm. I think it might be broken."

Harry thought so too; he could see what looked suspiciously like a bone sticking out, forcing George's shirt to tent on his upper arm. "Perhaps you should go back."

"The door was locked - remember," George's arm was beginning to hurt horribly, and he wished he could go back. But because he couldn't he nodded towards the large oak door that was inset into the wall. "Come on. But have your wand ready."

Harry did as George ordered but on entering the next room he found it wasn't necessary; the next test had been dealt with for them. Gagging at the smell emanating from the massive troll on the floor, George gave a shiver. "Glad we didn't have to fight that."

"Me too," Harry skirted around the unconscious creature. "I wonder what comes next."

Opening the door on the far side of the troll, they found Ron lying frozen on the floor. Harry aimed his wand at his friend. "Finite Incantatum."

Ron shot to his feet. "Where's Neville, and what are you doing here?"

"I don't know where he is, and we obviously came after you," George wandered over to where different colored and sized bottles sat in a row on a large marble table. "What are these?"

"Bottles containing some sort of liquid," Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying by the bottles and surrounded by broken glass. Harry then began reading out loud.

"Of all seven bottles, only one will succeed

But to work it out, great cunning you'll need

But what to choose is not as easy as you think

Three of us will cause your demise

Two of us are safe to drink

One of us will take you forward

One will take you back

Now stranger it's up to you to decide

Whether..."

The remaining lines were just a mass of wet ink. "What did the rest of it say?"

"Something about being identical but not looking like that," Ron's forehead scrunched up as he tried to remember. "But Neville worked out what was the safe one. When I told him he couldn't go on, that it was too dangerous and we should wait here, we got into an argument."

"Did Neville take the potion?" George asked.

"Yeah," Ron had been stunned when his friend had ignored his warning, uncorked the bottle and drank the contents. "I tried to stop him by snatching the bottle away but I was too late. The bottle slipped through my fingers and smashed on the table. Neville then used Petrificus on me and went through those flames."

"I didn't know he had it in him," George owned as he eyed up the remains of the bottle. "So it's really all gone."

"I already said that," Ron exclaimed in exasperation. "I dropped it breaking the glass; that's why you can't read the entire puzzle thingy. The liquid that was left inside spilt on it."

"So how do we get through?" Harry could see black flames leaping between them and an entrance.

"I don't know," Ron admitted. "I don't think there is a way through without the liquid."

"I might know a way but because I'm hurt I can't go through," George told the two boys. "So I think we need to wait for a teacher."

"But Neville is in there alone," Ron pointed out. "We can't just leave him."

"You have to," George was adamant. "It was Neville's choice to go into that room, and..."

Ron interrupted. "George, it doesn't matter why Neville did it. We have to help him."

"Ron, Mum would kill me if I let you go in there," George stood firm. "So the answer's no."

Ron scowled at his brother. "I'm not leaving my friend alone. You know who he's likely in there with."

"All the more reason for you not to go," George argued.

"George, if that is You-Know-Who in there Neville could be hurt," Ron argued in return.

"If that's him in there, then Neville is probably already dead," George responded. "Ron, you can't go in there."

"But he might not be," Ron turned to Harry. "Harry, tell him."

Harry glanced at the flames and then back at George. "Ron's right, George. Would you leave Fred alone in there?"

"No, but this is different," a rapidly whitening George responded.

"I think we have to go after him," Harry could see beads of sweat on George's head. "Ron and I will go."

"And what if Snape is in there?" George reminded him of their other suspect. "He hates you."

"He's not there," Harry said confidently. "I just left him after finishing another detention with him. That's why I was out so late."

"Another one?" Ron gasped.

"Yeah," Harry grimaced. "Ever since we beat Slytherin, he's found excuse after excuse to put me in detention. I'm just lucky that the Headmaster banned him from taking points away, otherwise Hufflepuff would have had minus points by the end of term."

"So if it's not Snape in there, then we have no idea who it is," George agreed that it couldn't be him if Harry had only just left the dungeons.

"You don't know that there is anyone in there," Ron argued.

"So you and Neville set up the harp and knocked out the troll?" George questioned his brother.

"I didn't think of that," Ron dropped his head before lifting it up again. "But I'm still going after Neville. And if you don't tell me how to get in, then I'm just going to walk through the flames."

George knew that Ron wouldn't do that. "Ron, I understand why you want to go after Neville but I really do think we should just wait for a teacher."

Ron shook his head. "Neville could be hurt, George. I can't leave him."

His head now spinning, George started wavering. "But if something happens to you..."

"I have to at least try," Ron snapped.

"No." George refused, his momentary lapse over. "And we should move back to the chess room. At least we can hide behind the pieces if someone comes in."

But, as with the door in the chess room, the boys were unable to unlock the one that led back into the troll room, and Harry sighed. "It looks like we stay here then and hope that a teacher comes before whoever is in that room beyond the flames comes out."

"Make sure you keep your wands ready," George warned.

Several minutes went by with the boys sitting in silence and holding their wands. But with no sign of a teacher or of anyone coming out of the flame room, Ron turned to his brother. "George, please, we can't just sit here."

"No," George refused yet again. "We wait for McGonagall or Dumbledore. Now stop asking, Ron. I'm not going to change my mind."

Aware that George really wasn't going to budge, Ron pulled out the wizarding cards he usually kept in his pocket. "Might as well do something while we wait."

Harry kept looking between the flames and glancing at the cards in his hand. Suddenly he gasped as he read the card he'd just picked up. "You were going to use a flame freezing spell, weren't you?"

"How do you..." George's voice died away when his eyes fell on the card that Harry was holding.

Ron didn't hesitate, and he ripped the card out of Harry's hands and began to read. "Wendelin the Weird. She used the flame freezing spell "Ventulus Flamma" to protect her when she..." Ron stopped reading. "We can use the spell to get through the flames."

"I'm forbidding you to do this," George ground out through gritted teeth, the pain in his arm beginning to become too much for him.

"Sorry, George," Ron decided that he was going to try the spell on Harry, and aimed his wand at his friend. "Will you help me?"

Harry glanced at George's pleading face, and then at the flames. "It's the right thing to do, George."

"Thanks, mate," Ron took aim at Harry. "Ventulus Flamma."

Harry didn't feel any different. "How do we know it worked?"

"I don't know," Ron responded after glancing down at the card. "The card doesn't say."

Harry knew there was only one way to find out, and he tentatively reached out with his hand towards the flames. "Ouch! That didn't work."

"Let me try again," Ron tried once more, and this time Harry felt as if someone had dipped him in a bucket of ice.

"I think that it might have worked," Harry went to reach out again. But just as he did so, George gave a small sigh and slumped to the ground. Ron knelt down by his brother. "I think he's fainted but there's a lot of blood coming from his arm."

Harry glanced behind him at the flames, and then back at the two boys, and he made a snap decision. After putting his wand up his sleeve to protect it from the flames, he took a deep breath. "Ron, you'll have to stay with George. I'm going after Neville."

"You can't go in there alone," Ron didn't manage to say anything further as Harry disappeared from his sight by walking into the flames. "Both of them bloody well left me behind." Knowing that moaning about things wasn't going to help George, Ron turned his attention back to his fallen brother.

As Harry stepped into the flames, he came to the swift realization that the spell hadn't worked quite as it should have done, or that the flames were far worse than those the spell was designed to combat, because almost immediately Harry felt heat scorching his body. Seconds later he was free from the hellish warmth, and Harry collapsed into the next room with smoking clothes and more than one burn on his body.

"Mr. Potter, we meet again," A man's voice pierced Harry's pain-filled fog.

"Professor Quirrell!" Harry coughed, the intense heat having scorched his lungs. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for this, dear boy," Quirinus held up a rough looking blood-red stone. He frowned as Harry coughed again. "What did you use to get through the flames?"

"Freezing spell," Harry blurted out before his brain analyzed what Quirrell had said. "You're after the Stone!"

"Yes, and I have it," Quirinus turned to look down at a heap on the floor. "Thanks to Mr. Longbottom."

Harry followed Quirrell's line of sight. "Is he...?"

"No, I decided to let him live," Quirinus gave an almost secretive smile. "He was most helpful."

Harry found it hard to believe what the man had just said. "Why would he help you?"

"Because we can give him what he wants," Quirinus began to explain.

Harry interrupted him. "We?"

"My Master and I," Quirinus informed him.

Harry knew he had to keep Quirrell talking until hopefully a teacher came along. He didn't want him going back into the potions room; Ron and George would be defenseless against him. "What did he want?"

"That is between Mr. Longbottom and my Master," Quirinus had no intention of revealing what had occurred in the room.

"You mean You-Know-Who, don't you?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Quirinus confirmed again.

"Then that was you in the Forest, wasn't it?" Harry continued with his questions, still trying to buy time. "You were taking the blood from the unicorns for him, weren't you?"

"It was to help nourish him," Quirinus ran a hand over the back of his neck.

"But you were the one who was going to drink it," Harry gave a shiver. "Or was that him?"

"It was both of us," Quirinus gave a tight smile. "Wherever my Master does, so do I."

Harry couldn't read Quirrell's expression. "What do you mean?"

"Because I failed to acquire the Stone at Diagon Alley," Quirinus responded in a low voice, "my Master decided that he needed to be closer to me."

Something about Quirrell's words chilled Harry. "How?"

"That doesn't concern you, Potter," Quirrell seemed to come back to himself, and he straightened. "Now, what to do with you."

Before any decision could be made as to Harry's fate, a strange raspy voice filled the room. "Let me see the boy."

"But Master..." Quirinus began to protest.

"Now," the voice demanded.

Harry stood transfixed as Quirrell began to unwrap the turban he always wore. As he finished unwrapping it, Harry understood why the man wore it as a chalk-white face emerged from the back of Quirrell's head. "My God."

"Lord Voldemort will suffice," the abomination sticking out of the back of Quirrell's head quipped. "You look like you don't care for what you see, Potter. It's your fault that I am like this."

"I did that to you?" Harry was frightened and fascinated at the same time.

"When I cast the killing spell on you, it rebounded, ripping me from my body, and leaving me in agonizing pain," Voldemort explained.

"You deserved it. You killed my parents and my brother," Harry said quietly.

"Your mother didn't have to die," Voldemort had had no intention of killing her. "But the stupid girl wouldn't step aside."

"She wasn't stupid, she was brave," Harry felt a warm sensation in his stomach as he thought about how courageous his mother must have been to stand up to the horror he was currently witnessing, "and because she loved me."

Because of Quirrell, Voldemort was aware of what had happened after his disembodiment, and he therefore decided to bate Harry. "Your mother might have loved you but she let your brother die,"

Voldemort smiled, or least Harry thought it was a smile, before he continued, "or perhaps it was your fault, Harry Potter."

At the mention of his brother, Harry suffered a moment's guilt. Then he recalled what Dumbledore had said, and he met Voldemort's eyes. "You're a liar. I didn't kill him. Nor did my Mum. It was your fault."

"So you've finally grown a backbone," Voldemort laughed out loud. "You weren't quite so brave in the Forest, were you, Potter? But perhaps you are more like your parents than I first believed."

"My parents were brilliant," Harry said in a resolute voice.

"And you can tell them that when you join them," Voldemort informed Harry. "Quirrell, dispatch the boy."

Harry's eyes widened as Quirrell withdrew his wand, and instead of adopting his usual trick of closing his eyes and singing to hide from his fears, Harry did as he knew his mother had. He stood tall before Voldemort and continued to defy him. "Even if you kill me, Professor Dumbledore will beat you."

Quirrell wasn't impressed. "He's no match for Lord Voldemort."

"He's just an ugly face in the back of someone's head," Harry screamed at the hybrid man, fear at what was to come making him angry. "And Professor Dumbledore will beat him and you."

"Thank you for your confidence, Harry, but I think you should leave now," Professor Dumbledore's voice interrupted the gathering. His voice then became sad and pleading. "Quirinus, why didn't you come to me?"

"You couldn't have helped me," Quirrell snarled, and reached out to grab Harry. "Don't come any closer."

Albus stopped moving. "Don't do it, Quirinus."

Harry found himself being firmly held in Quirrell's arms, and pain lanced through his forehead where his scar resided; a pain that was quite overwhelming, and Harry began to struggle to get free of it. "Let go of me."

"You can't escape, Quirinus," Albus kept his wand drawn and his voice low.

Quirinus' arm tightened around Harry's throat, and with the pain worsening, Harry desperately clutched at the arm. Quirinus just ignored Harry's actions, and aimed his wand at Neville. "If you don't stand aside I'll kill Longbottom. Then I'll kill Potter."

Albus wasn't so sure about that. "You would have already killed Neville if you intended to do so."

"Reducto," Quirinus blew a hole in Neville's leg making the boy jerk, but he didn't awaken. "The next one goes through his head."

Unnoticed by Quirrell, Harry by now had managed to get his wand into his hand, and although he couldn't see to aim, he did his best, and turned it to where he thought Quirrell's own leg was. Then he copied the spell that Quirrell had used on Neville, hoping that it would work. "Reducto."

Harry knew he'd struck gold when Quirrell gave a scream and started to release Harry. But as Harry tried to move away, Quirrell overcame the pain and reached out, his hand grabbing Harry by the scruff of his neck.

"Accio Harry," Albus called out.

Not having that tight a grip on Harry's neck, Quirrell couldn't hold on against the force of the spell, and Harry shot across the room. Harry found himself being catapulted into a pair of arms, and he was disgusted to realize that it was Snape holding him. Snape was obviously just as disgusted because he quickly released Harry. "Get out now, Potter."

Harry, however, was transfixed by what had started to happen to Quirrell. "Headmaster, what's happening to him?"

Albus was just as dumbfounded as Harry. "I don't know, Harry."

A rapidly disintegrating Quirrell met Albus' eyes. "What is this?"

Severus provided the answer. "It began as soon as he touched Potter."

"But he was holding me earlier, and nothing happened," Harry pointed out.

"But he wasn't touching your skin," Severus drawled out. "It was only then that this began."

Albus held out his hand. "Quirinus, let me help you."

"You can't help me," Quirinus' face and voice was filled with terror and acceptance. "No-one can."

Even as Albus began to recite a spell, Quirrell's body fell apart, dropping into a pile of ashes, the rough red stone sitting atop them. "I'm so sorry, Quirinus."

Harry burst into tears. "I killed him."

"No, you didn't, Harry," Albus turned away from the terrible sight to put an arm around Harry. "Voldemort did."

However before Albus could touch Harry, an unearthly screech filled the room, and all three conscious occupants of the room turned to see a mist rise up from the ashes and head directly towards Harry. Intending to pull Harry out of the way, Albus wasn't quick enough, and Harry screamed as the mist passed right through him.

Next Chapter: Harry gets a surprise visitor; the fate of the Stone is decided.

Chapter 16: A Relative Disappearance

Neville's stomach lurched over as the door to the private room he was staying in began to open. "Hello, Gran."

"Good morning, Neville," Augusta Longbottom brushed off the chair at the side of Neville's bed, before sitting down and getting straight to the point. "Albus has filled me in on your escapade. What do you have to say about it?"

"I'm sorry, Gran," Neville automatically apologized, following his usual pattern when in front of his grandmother.

"For what?" Augusta's face was stern.

"For going against school rules, and going somewhere I knew I shouldn't have," Neville hurriedly spat out.

"Albus told me that you thought that this dratted Stone wasn't safe, and that's why you went after it. Is that true?" Augusta pinned Neville with a steely eye.

"No, Gran," Neville found it impossible to lie to his Gran. "I wanted to show everyone that I could be as good as Harry Potter; that I could be someone."

Augusta nodded and gave a small grunt. "And?"

Neville wasn't quite sure what else he was supposed to be saying, so he blurted out what he'd always wanted. "I wanted you to be proud of me, like you were with Dad."

"I am still proud of both your father and your mother," Augusta swallowed hard as she thought about her only son and his wife. "And I'm proud of you, Neville."

"Really?" Neville could barely believe what he was hearing.

"Yes," Augusta's severe look vanished, and she rose to her feet, closing the door behind her. "Neville, you've never once stood up for anything before. This time, although your reasoning was a little askew, you did exactly that. You stood up for yourself and what you believed in."

"So you're not angry with me?" Neville decided to check.

"No, I'm not," Augusta's voice softened in a way that Neville rarely had heard. "According to Albus you faced off with Voldemort."

Neville winced at his grandmother's use of the name. Just like the Headmaster, she too was unafraid to use You-Know-Who's real name. "I don't remember what happened."

"Albus believes that you tried to stop him from stealing the Stone, and you were hurt in the process," Augusta had been absolutely amazed but she'd also been full of pride. "You were really brave, Neville. Just like Frank would have been."

Neville promptly burst into tears because, in the same way he'd seen in the mirror, his Gran was wearing a proud smile. Her visage disappeared when Neville found himself being smothered against his Gran for a brief moment, before she let him go again. Not wanting to disappoint her, or for his Gran to change her mind about him, Neville quickly brushed away the tears. "Sorry. It was just when you mentioned Dad."

"That's okay," Augusta brushed down her jacket. "Villers will be arriving later this morning to pack your things, and to escort you home."

Villers was the Longbottoms' oldest and most trusted house-elf. "But school doesn't finish for five days."

"And I've decided that it won't hurt for you to return home early," August informed Neville. "Albus has cancelled all examinations in the light of what has happened, so you won't be missing anything. Now get a little more rest, and I will see you at dinner tonight."

Neville couldn't stop smiling, and he bid his grandmother good day before lying back, and hugging himself. His Gran was proud of him, and he'd stood up to Voldemort. He was willing to bet that Harry hadn't done that. Another knock at the door disturbed his thoughts. "Come in."

Ron walked into the room. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit sore and tired, but I'm okay," Neville was happy to see his friend. He'd been afraid after what had happened in the bottle room, that Ron might be angry with him "You?"

"I'm okay," Ron assured him. "Neville, I'm sorry that we got into a fight."

"Me too," Neville was flooded with the sweet feeling of relief that Ron wasn't mad at him. "Gran came to see me."

"I know," Ron had been asked to wait until Augusta had concluded her visit before he was allowed to go in and visit Neville. "I was sitting with Harry when she arrived."

"Harry?" Neville wondered what had happened to Harry. "What is he doing in here?"

"He and George came after us," Ron then explained what had happened up until Harry went through the flames, including George's broken arm, and Harry's insistence that Neville shouldn't be left alone. Ron's face then became proud as he revealed what he'd achieved. "I put a sixth year spell on him so that he could get through the flames to see what had happened to you."

Neville was hit with a shaft of guilt. "He was worried about me?"

"Yeah, we all were," Ron thought Neville had gone rather pale. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Neville responded automatically. "So what happened to him?"

"He fought with Quirrell, who was sort of You-Know-Who, and..." Ron didn't get any further.

"Harry fought him?" Neville's joy at his own accomplishment began to seep away. "How?"

Ron told him what Albus had said had happened. "And after Quirrell fell to bits, You-Know-Who went back to a sort of spirit form, and he went straight through Harry, drained most of his core."

"Will he be okay?" Neville asked.

"He will be eventually once he wakes up," Ron's face had turned grave. "But he stopped breathing when he was being carried out." Ron stopped speaking and glanced behind him to the slightly ajar door, his voice dropping to a whisper. "You know that you're not supposed to be able to apparate on Hogwarts' grounds?"

"Course." Neville kept his own voice low as well.

"Well, Dumbledore can," Ron's voice was full of excitement, as well as a bit of awe. "He vanished with Harry when we were in the chess room so that Madam Pomfrey could save Harry."

"Wow!" Despite his disappointment that Harry too had been a hero, Neville was more than a little horrified at what his scheming to get Ron's friendship back had almost done to Harry. "When will he wake up?"

"Mum said probably not for a week or two," Ron had been shocked to see his Mum sitting at Harry's bedside when he'd finally been allowed in to see his friend, and he explained to Neville who seemed confused at his comment. "Mum came because Harry doesn't have anyone else close by, and Professor McGonagall had classes to teach. Charlie also came over, and I know Charlie would have liked to have stayed with Harry. But he said that it's been really busy on the reserve, and he had to go back once he found out that Harry would be okay."

"His relatives didn't come?" Neville questioned.

"They didn't, but I don't know if Dumbledore asked them to or not," Ron admitted.

"So he really will be okay then?" Neville checked again.

"Yeah," Ron confirmed.

Feeling decidedly uncomfortable, Neville decided that it was time for a change of subject. "So have I missed anything?"

He had, and Ron went on to tell Neville about how Gryffindor had gotten slaughtered by Slytherin. "They'd have probably been beaten

anyway, but with George out with an injured arm, it just made things worse."

"So Slytherin are going to win the House and Quidditch Cups, aren't they?" Neville wasn't really that bothered about either of them but he knew that Ron was.

"They've already won the Quidditch Cup," Ron responded dismally. "And they're over four hundred points in front of everyone else for the House Cup, and there's less than a week of term left, so I'd say that that Cup is also theirs as well."

"There's always next year," Neville tried to cheer his friend up. "Perhaps you'll help Gryffindor slaughter Slytherin. You said you wanted to play quidditch."

Ron looked at his friend as if he was mad. "Me, play quidditch?"

Neville nodded. "Yes, you. Look how good you were at catching that key. You could try for the seeker position."

Ron's face cleared up at the thought of playing quidditch for Gryffindor, and he grinned at his friend. "Do you really think I've got a chance at seeker? I always imagined that I'd do better in goal."

"I think you should try for seeker," Neville said firmly. "I think you'd give Harry a challenge."

Ron knew differently, and he shook his head. "Harry would wipe the floor with me."

Although he felt guilty about Harry's injuries, Neville's jealousy refused to die, and he decided that he wanted Ron to go up against Harry, and beat him. "You don't know that until you're in a proper game."

"You might be right," Ron began to think about his chances as seeker, before he glanced up at the clock on the wall. "I'd best go. I've still got homework to do. You think that Snape would let up with only a few days to go but he still assigned homework. He's the only teacher who did."

"I won't have to do it," Neville smiled happily. "Gran has arranged for me to go home later today to spend some time recovering."

"Will I get to see you over the summer?" Ron asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Neville wasn't sure whether his Gran would let him visit. "I'll write."

Ron got to his feet. "I will too. See you then, Nev."

"See you," Neville smiled happily to himself that Ron seemed to be back to being his friend again. His smile fell away, however, when he thought about Harry and George, and how they'd gotten hurt. Neville knew he had a lot to think about over the holidays.

In his office Albus sat playing with a rough hewn red stone. "We came far too close to losing this."

"I still don't understand how Voldemort or Quirrell or whoever he was managed to get it out of your hiding place," Nicolas Flamel held out his hand. "You said it was foolproof."

"I thought it was," Albus admitted. "But even I'm not infallible."

"Even so, I'm still stunned that four schoolchildren got past your traps," Nicolas turned over the stone that Albus had passed back to him. "And I'm puzzled as to why they'd bother to go looking for the Stone in the first place."

Albus exhaled. "Neville Longbottom was afraid that Voldemort would obtain it, and he therefore decided to go after it. His best friend, Ron Weasley, followed. And then Ron's older brother, George, and Harry Potter went after him. It could have been an absolute disaster."

"So what happened?" Nicolas persisted. "What went wrong?"

"Quirrell or Voldemort disarmed my alarms. As you already know, I'd set them up to warn me of anyone getting past the Cerberus and into the Devil's Snare." Albus rubbed the back of his neck. "And they weren't child's play; whoever dismantled them would have had to use dark magic. And they were something the children wouldn't have been able to get past if the alarms hadn't already been dismantled."

"Fair enough. But you said that Quirrell used a harp to get past the Cerberus," Nicolas pocketed his precious stone. "What about the boys? They couldn't have known how to get past it."

"Harry apparently discovered by accident how to get past the dog," Albus revealed. "He told his friends which included Neville and Ron. Neville sang, putting the dog to sleep, allowing him and Ron free access to the trapdoor. Unfortunately they left the door leading back to the school open."

"And...?" Nicolas knew there was more.

Albus then told him how Harry and George had been forced to jump through the trapdoor, as well as what happened afterwards. "And the upshot of everything is that poor Harry bore the brunt of it all."

"You said he'll recover though," Nicolas had been concerned to hear about the boy's close call.

"He will," Albus had been frightened he'd lost Harry for a few moments when the boy had stopped breathing, and he'd been forced to apparate inside the school.

"So have you told him about the prophecy yet?" Nicolas asked.

"No," Albus again rubbed his neck, tension making it ache. "And I'm not sure when I should. He's already been through enough, and he's still just a boy."

"A boy who has a destiny," Nicolas reminded Albus of the stakes. "A boy who's supposed to destroy the greatest evil this world has ever known."

"I'm still not sure that Voldemort is the greatest evil we've ever encountered," Albus ran his fingers down his wand as he spoke, his mind in the past. "There was another dark wizard this century."

Nicolas couldn't miss the motion, and he knew only too well about whom Albus was speaking. "And he wasn't the greatest evil, Albus. I admit that he came close, and that he had the potential to be but you killed him before he got the chance to develop it further."

"I thought he'd listen to me," Albus' voice had become even more tired, and was now also tinged with more than a little sadness and regret. "That he cared about me; that he loved me."

"Sometimes love isn't enough, Albus," Nicolas responded in a gentle tone. "Sometimes power is a far greater aphrodisiac."

"So I discovered," Albus visibly straightened and got to his feet. He then changed the subject. "Have you decided whether or not to destroy the Stone?"

"If it was just me then I would do so, but there's Peri to consider," Nicolas also rose. "So if anyone asks, I think that you should mention in passing that it's now time for me to put my business in order, and that maybe death is the next great adventure for me."

"But you're not going to destroy the stone are you?" Albus knew his old friend too well.

"I am not," Nicolas confirmed. "But I will be disappearing, and for quite some time."

"I'll miss you," Albus held out his hand.

"I'm sure you will," Nicolas ignored the hand, and hugged Albus. "I'll give Peri your love."

"I'll miss her as well," Albus tapped a stone on his wall. "You can apparate out from here."

"I'd appreciate it," Nicolas smiled ruefully. "That walk from the gates is getting to be rather telling."

"Be well," Albus stood back, and for the last time ever, he saw his friend disappear.

Harry opened his eyes to find a somewhat blurred but kindly face looking back at him. "Mrs. Weasley," he croaked, "what are you doing here?"

"Drink this," Molly scooped Harry up and nestled him against her.

Harry dutifully opened his mouth, and drank the creamy concoction that Molly was holding. After he'd finished, he was laid back against the pillows, and passed his glasses. "What was that?"

"A pick-me up," Molly straightened Harry's pillows.

It was then that Harry realized where he had to be, even though he had never been in this particular room before. "I'm in your house, aren't I?"

"School finished almost a week ago," Molly informed him. "You've been recovering slowly from your run-in with him." The last word came out as almost a whisper.

"What happened to me?" Harry could remember little about the whole ordeal.

"Your magical core was severely drained by him," Molly again whispered 'him'.

"Oh." Harry could see that talking about Voldemort was bothering Molly. "Was everyone else okay?"

"Neville was taken home by his Gran several days after it all happened, George had to re-grow a bone in his arm, and Ron was shook up, but yes, everyone is okay," Molly confirmed. "You suffered the most."

Harry changed the subject after a moment's silence. "I thought I was supposed to go to my relatives' home."

"You were but Albus thought you'd do better here," Molly stroked Harry's hair off his face. "Minerva will be taking over your care in a couple of days, and then you'll be returning to your relatives for a fortnight."

Harry's face fell. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to go."

"It was the protection that staying with them gives you, that saved your life," Molly climbed to her feet, and threw open the curtains to reveal that the day was going to be bright and sunny. "So I'm afraid you still have to go back."

"Do you know where I'm going afterwards?" Harry asked. "Will it be back to Aunt Minnie's?"

"I might know," Molly gave a gentle smile, "but I'm going to leave it up to someone else to tell you."

"Who?" Harry wondered what the big secret was.

"You'll see," Molly opened the door. "I'm off to make you some breakfast."

Harry was left alone but his solitude didn't last long when a knock sounded at the door, and it opened to reveal a familiar face. "Charlie!"

"Hi, Harry," Charlie moved into the room and scooped Harry up from the pillows to give him a hug. "You frightened us all to death."

Harry wrapped his arms around the red-head, and held on tightly, feeling safe. "Sorry."

"You will be," Charlie dropped a brief kiss onto Harry's forehead, before lowering him back into the bed.

Harry immediately became nervous. "What do you mean?"

Charlie sat down in the chair that his mother had just vacated. "I warned you about keeping out of trouble when I saw you last time, didn't I?"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "But I didn't intentionally go looking for it."

"George did explain that it was his fault," Charlie accepted that much. "But you didn't have to go on alone after Neville." He held up his hand when Harry went to protest. "I know it was very brave of you, but you still shouldn't have done it. And there will be a price to pay."

"A price?" Harry struggled to keep the tears out of his voice, afraid that Charlie was going to spank him.

"When you've completed your stay with your relatives, you'll be spending a week with me on the reserve in Romania," Charlie

watched Harry's face change from afraid and worried, to overjoyed. "Don't get too excited; this isn't going to be a holiday."

Despite Charlie's words, Harry couldn't help but feel thrilled. "What am I going to be doing? Will I see the dragons? Where will I sleep?"

"Whoa," Charlie held up a hand. "You're going to be helping clean out the dragon enclosures, and believe me it's going to be hard work."

"That's my punishment?" Harry asked in an incredulous voice.

"Yes," Charlie confirmed. "And it's going to be Ron and George's punishment as well."

"They're both going to be there when I am?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Yes, and the three of you will be sharing a tent and the workload," Charlie promised. "But as I've just said, this is no holiday. It's very hard work taking care of dragons, and you're going to be exhausted by the end of the day."

"I don't care," Harry smiled happily at Charlie. "It will be fun to see what you do."

Charlie could see that his words about being a punishment weren't making a dent in Harry's happiness. But he knew that the boy was going to be shocked at how hard it would be for him, but it would also be a good lesson. "Okay." His face then turned serious. "Harry, is there anything you want to talk about? About what happened, I mean."

Harry's good mood vanished, and his response was hesitant. "I don't know."

Charlie knew then that Harry did have something he wanted to talk about. "I'm going to say the same to you as I did at Christmas. If you want to talk, then we'll talk. If you don't, then we won't."

"I do but I don't know where to start," Harry admitted.

"Just spit out the first thing that comes to mind," Charlie suggested.

Harry was silent for a moment then the words almost fell out of his mouth. "You-Know-Who said that my Mum was stupid; that she didn't have to die. And that it might have been my fault that Jamie died."

"And did you believe him?" Charlie took Harry's hand.

Harry squeezed Charlie's roughened hand tightly. "No. I called him a liar."

"That was brave of you," Charlie wasn't sure if he'd have had the guts to do that.

"That's what he said," Harry revealed. "To be honest I didn't even think about to whom I was talking. He made me so angry, Charlie." Harry then fell silent, not quite knowing how to put his feelings into words. "I want to say other things but I can feel myself getting angry just thinking about him."

"How about we start at the beginning then?" Charlie asked, seeing that Harry was obviously struggling. "We'll start nice and slow, starting with where you first went through the flames; Ron and George have filled me in on what happened before that."

"Okay then," Harry then recited what had happened from the moment he entered the final chamber up until his last memory of fighting with Quirrell. "I don't know what happened after that."

Charlie told him. "You almost died, Harry. If the Headmaster hadn't gotten you to the hospital wing in time, I hate to think what might have happened."

Harry was rather disturbed at how close a call he'd had. "Me too. But I can't remember that much after I used the Reducto spell on Professor Quirrell."

"You may never remember," Charlie was glad that Harry couldn't recall what he imagined would have been a horrible death. "And it's probably for the best."

"I'm glad I can't remember," Harry plucked at the sheet. "I've never really liked him but I wouldn't have wanted him to die."

"Even though he would have killed you?" Charlie thought it important to discuss all aspects of what had happened.

"I'm not sure he would have," Harry decided. "He didn't kill Neville."

"Do you know why?" Charlie had been surprised that Neville had survived the encounter.

"No," Harry wasn't sure if Charlie knew that Neville had helped Quirrell but he wasn't going to tell on his friend until he'd spoken to him. "Do you?"

"No-one does," Charlie had hoped to learn more about what had gone on, so that he could tell Albus. "Not even Neville. He can't remember what happened."

"Perhaps that's better for him as well," Harry then fell silent.

"Something is still bothering you, isn't it?" Charlie couldn't miss the nervous plucking of the sheet that Harry had resumed in his silence.

"Yeah," Harry stopped plucking at the sheet when Charlie's hand covered his again. "Do you think that Mum should have stood aside, and let him kill me?"

"No," Charlie shook his head. "I don't think any mother would have done that."

"But how do you know?" Harry asked.

Charlie got to his feet. "I'll be back in one moment."

However it wasn't Charlie who returned, but Mrs. Weasley. "Charlie said that you have something you need to know."

"Yeah," Harry started to play with the sheets again.

"You can talk to me about anything, Harry," Molly assured him. "And it will remain between the two of us, or between the three of us if you want me to tell Charlie."

"It's okay to tell Charlie," Harry confirmed, before asking Molly what he'd asked Charlie. "You-Know-Who said that Mum didn't have to

die; that she could have stood aside. Do you think that Mum should have stood aside when You-Know-Who told her to? She could have saved Jamie and herself."

"No, I don't think she should have stood aside," Molly confirmed Charlie's answer. "Lily would have had no idea what would happen to you or your brother, and she did what she believed was right for you at the time."

"How can you know that?" Harry was still unwilling to take Molly's answer at face value.

"Because it's what I would have done," Molly took Harry's hand which was now shaking. "And it's what Charlie would do for you now."

Harry let the subject of his mother drop for a moment. "Charlie really likes me, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does, Harry. Very much," Molly wondered where Harry was going with this. "And you care about him, don't you?"

Harry thought carefully before responding. "A lot. I don't know what it's like to have parents but I think that Charlie is almost like a parent for me."

"And what about Minerva?" Molly asked.

"She's nice and all," Harry responded hesitantly but honestly, "but Aunt Minnie still feels like my teacher. It's different with Charlie. At first I thought he was just my friend. But it's not like how things are with Ron or Justin. It feels different."

"Do you wish that Charlie was your Dad?" Molly asked tentatively.

Harry began to chew on his lip. "Err..."

Molly encouraged Harry to go on. "Harry, I promise that whatever you tell me won't get back to Minerva or to Charlie."

"Yes and no," Harry was torn between his loyalty to Minerva for her kindness, how he felt about his birth father, and his growing feelings for Charlie, and it showed on his face.

Molly decided to cut Harry a break and got to her feet. "We can talk about this some other time. Right now I'd better get back down, and take over from Charlie. I left him cooking bacon, and he's a terrible cook."

Harry was relieved to be let off the hook. "Before you go, Mrs. Weasley, where am I? I know it must be your house, but I don't know whose room this is."

"It's Ginny's," Molly informed him. "Ron is sharing with Percy, and Ginny has Ron's room. I thought Ron's room would be a little too bright for you, and this is closer to my bedroom."

"Thank you," Harry smiled up at Molly, "I'll thank Ginny for giving up her room when I see her."

"She offered," Molly hadn't been surprised at Ginny's offer - her daughter's crush on the Boy Who Lived wasn't exactly a secret. "I'll send her up later if you'd like."

"I would," Harry wondered if Ginny would say more to him than she had done at Christmas.

"Then I'll send her up," Molly headed out.

Charlie returned a short time later bearing two plates loaded up with food, one for him and one for Harry. "Mum said don't worry if you can't eat it all. Just eat what you can."

There was silence as the two of them ate. Harry managed just over half of his plate before admitting defeat. Charlie removed Harry's plate. "You did pretty well."

"I was hungry," Harry now, however, felt almost uncomfortably full. "And the food was good."

"Tell me about it," Charlie finished off the bacon and sausage Harry had left. "This is far better than the food I get at the camp."

Harry had forgotten that Charlie shouldn't have been at home. "Have you had to take holiday to come here?"

"I've been portkeying back and forth," Charlie revealed.

Harry frowned. "Isn't that expensive?"

"A little," Charlie had had to dig deep into his savings to do so. "But you're worth it."

"I have money if you need any," Harry offered. "It's in my trunk, or we could go to the bank."

"I don't but thank you," Charlie didn't try and brush aside Harry's offer, not wanting to offend him. "And if I do need anything, then I will ask."

"Good," Harry was satisfied with Charlie's answer. "When do you have to go back?"

"Tomorrow," Charlie could see that Harry was disappointed. "But you'll be in Romania with me before you know it."

"I hope so," Harry yawned. "Sorry but just eating has worn me out."

"Then close your eyes and get some rest," Charlie knew that it would still take a few days before Harry was back on his feet.

"I'm okay," Harry protested. "We can talk about quidditch." However less than five minutes later, he was sound asleep.

A week later Harry found his stomach going over in knots. He turned to Minerva. "Do I really have to go back?"

"Yes," Minerva rang the door bell and waited. And waited. And waited. "Where they can be?"

"Perhaps they've moved," Harry suggested hopefully.

"Hello there!" A familiar voice drifted over.

"Hello, Mrs. Green," Harry greeted the woman who lived two doors down. "Is my Aunt in?"

"She went on holiday to Greece for a fortnight," Mrs. Green came waddling up. "But she left this for you."

Harry took the envelope with his name on it. "Thanks."

Minerva smiled politely at the woman. "Was it a last minute thing?"

"So I believe," Mrs. Green nodded as she watched Harry open the letter. "I was in the travel agency looking at caravan holidays in Wales when they came in. They got ever such a good bargain. Eight hundred pounds for the four of them."

"Four?" Harry passed the letter and envelope to Minerva.

"That Piers boy was with them," Mrs. Green told Harry. "So is this your granny?"

"I'm his Great Aunt on his father's side," Minerva lied. "I was supposed to be dropping Harry back home to stay with the Dursleys but it looks as though that won't be possible now."

"I suppose Petunia thought that you could take young Harry back with you," Mrs. Green smiled at Harry. She liked the shy, if a little strange, young man.

"That I can," Minerva placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "But first we'll have a cup of tea."

"I can give you one," Mrs. Green hurriedly offered; like Petunia she liked to gossip.

Minerva slipped her hand into her pocket, and produced a front door key, before telling an outright lie. "No need. We can use Harry's key to get in."

"Well, I suppose I'd better be getting back then," Mrs. Green ruffled Harry's hair. "You be good for your old Auntie."

"I will," Harry tried not to wince at the woman's description of Minerva.

Once inside the house, Minerva began to fume. "She's supposed to be here."

"I could stay on my own," Harry thought about all the television he could watch, and the video games he could play in Dudley's absence.

"You will do no such thing," Minerva snapped, feeling rather annoyed at the Dursleys. "We're going to have a cup of tea and wait for Albus." Minerva then took out a piece of parchment, wrote on it, and tapped it with her wand, the writing vanishing from it. Minerva then replaced the parchment in her cloak.

Harry was fascinated. "How did you make the writing vanish, and where did it go?"

"It's two-way parchment," Minerva explained. "Albus has the twin of it, and what I've written will appear on his parchment."

"But how will he know he's got a message?" Harry quite sensibly asked.

"He won't until he checks it," Minerva set about making tea as she talked, "but I have a feeling that it won't be long before he does."

She was right. Albus turned up less than ten minutes after Minerva wrote the note. "Ah, tea. How delightful."

Minerva poured Albus a cup. "We have a problem, Albus."

Albus read the letter that the Dursleys had left for Harry. "Well, they're not saying he can't stay here. In fact they've said he can, and acquiescence is an important part of the blood spell."

"They didn't even leave him a key," Minerva snapped. "I had to magically produce one."

"But they still offered," Albus reminded Minerva of the letter's contents, "and so I think that Harry should stay here as planned."

"But I have plans," Minerva responded in an exasperated tone. "I can't look after him."

"Then I will find someone to watch over Harry," Albus winked at Harry. "In the meantime, let's finish this delightful pot of tea."

Aware that Albus wouldn't move until he was ready to do so, Minerva settled into her seat.

After he'd finished his tea, Albus got to his feet. "Can you take care of Harry until tomorrow?"

"Yes," Minerva nodded. "I don't have to be in Cardiff until tomorrow afternoon."

"Then I'll be by tomorrow morning with a replacement for you," Albus promised. He then winked at Harry yet again, and left the house.

"We'd better investigate your sleeping arrangements," Minerva suggested.

"I usually sleep in the cupboard under the stairs," Harry offered up the information, and walked over to the door. However when he opened it, the only things in it were coats, hats and winter shoes.

"Let's try the usual places, shall we?" Minerva led the way upstairs and opened the first door she came to. "I have the feeling this is meant for you."

Harry could tell she wasn't happy from the severity of her voice. "It's okay, Aunt Minnie."

"A scruffy mattress with threadbare sheets and a blanket I wouldn't use for a dog are not okay," Minerva angrily slammed the door shut. "Let's see what else there is."

Harry nervously followed his guardian down the hallway, watching as she tried yet another door. It was locked but a tap from Minerva's wand soon unlocked it, and she swung the door open, prompting Harry to tell her what the beautifully decorated room represented. "This is the guest room."

Minerva surveyed the room, and found it satisfactory. "Now it's your room." She took Harry's trunk from her pocket and unshrunk it. "Come along. You can unpack while I find myself somewhere to sleep."

Harry's hands were shaking a little as he unpacked his things and placed them in the empty wardrobe. He wondered where Minerva

was going to stay. She soon told him. "After changing the sheets, I've decided to use the master bedroom for tonight. Whoever takes over for me will have to stay in there as well."

"My Aunt will probably go mad at me," Harry responded nervously.

"She'll do nothing of the sort," Minerva's voice was steely. "I will return the day before she does, and if she has a problem, then she'll be dealing with me."

Harry grinned widely at his guardian. "I wish you were able to stay with me now."

Minerva's face softened. "Normally I would have but my goddaughter is due to give birth in a couple of days, and I promised I'd be there for her."

"You have a goddaughter?" Harry had never heard Minerva speak about her before.

"I have two goddaughters and a godson. And their children call me 'Grandmother'." Minerva revealed, before deciding that talk could wait. "I'll tell you all about them after we see what we can find to cook for dinner tonight."

After dinner, Harry spent a pleasant evening with Minerva who told him all about her 'family' in detail. And it was a relaxed and happy pair who climbed the stairs to go to bed that night.

However, that relaxed attitude vanished when Albus turned up the next morning with a replacement for Minerva. Minerva took one look, and shook her head. "Absolutely not."

And Harry was left wondering what was wrong with the person Albus had picked to take over his care.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers what it's like to be a normal child.

Chapter 17: Summer Fun

At Minerva's refusal to accept Albus' choice, he led her away from where Harry and the girl were standing. "Would you care to tell me why you don't consider her a suitable candidate to take care of Harry?"

"Because she's still a child herself," Minerva hissed, trying to make sure that the other two wouldn't overhear what they were saying.

"Then, by your reckoning so is Charlie Weasley. I seem to recall that they finished Hogwarts together," Albus' voice became quite stern. "But you are still going to entrust Harry to his care."

Minerva glared at Albus, totally unaffected by his severe tone. "Mr. Weasley is a sensible young man. Which is more than can be said for Nymphadora Tonks."

"I'll admit that she's a little boisterous and a tad on the clumsy side," Albus glanced over at the pink-haired young woman. "But she is trustworthy, and she will take her responsibility to look after Harry seriously."

"But..." Minerva tried to protest.

"She'll take very good care of Harry," Albus said firmly. "Just as Charlie will when Harry goes to Romania to stay with him."

"But Mr. Weasley is far more mature," Minerva argued for Charlie. "And Harry adores him."

"And I'm sure he'll adore Nymphadora," Albus softened his voice. "I thought you trusted me."

Minerva also softened. "I do, Albus. But she was always into mischief at school. I've lost track of how many times Pomona despaired of her."

"Yet she still managed to graduate with flying colors," Albus reminded his friend and colleague, "to say nothing of the fact that she was invited to become an Auror. You know as well as I do that such an offer is limited to one or two graduates at most each year; most people have to apply."

Minerva couldn't argue with Albus' points. "Very well, but I want something put in place in case she can't cope."

"I've already taken care of that, and I therefore think it's time for a few introductions," Albus stepped away from Minerva and walked over to where Nymphadora was waiting patiently. "Nymphadora Tonks meet Harry Potter."

"Hello," Harry, who'd been wondering what the problem was, held out his hand.

"Wotcha, Harry," The pink-haired girl grabbed Harry's hand firmly. "Call me Tonks."

Harry took an immediate liking to the young woman. "Okay then."

"I've filled Nymphadora in on Harry's needs, and so I do believe it's time we left them to it," Albus took Minerva's arm. "If you need me, Nymphadora, use the amulet."

"I will, Headmaster," Tonks promised, before turning back to Harry. "So do you want to grab something to eat and watch some television?"

"You know what a television is?" Harry wasn't used to witches who did.

"My Dad's a Muggleborn," Tonks gave Harry a questioning look. "Will that be a problem?"

"My Mum was a Muggleborn as well," Harry reminded Tonks.

Tonks relaxed. "Sorry, I forgot. It's just I've been given a hard time about it at the Academy."

"Why?" Harry followed Tonks into the kitchen.

"Because the purebloods were rather put out that I was offered a scholarship, especially given my Dad's blood purity," Tonks opened the fridge door.

"Are they all purebloods there?" Harry watched as she raided the fridge, and then started opening the cupboards, which had been mysteriously stocked during the night.

"Mostly," Tonks began to make cheese, tomato and ham sandwiches in the Muggle way. "There are a couple of half-bloods like me but they're in the year above me."

"Will you tell me about your training?" Harry had often wondered what the Aurors did, especially with Susan's aunt being their head. When Harry had asked Susan about it, she had had to admit that while she understood the basics, she had no real idea of what the training entailed.

"It's really boring," Tonks passed Harry half of the sandwiches, and sloppily poured out milk into two glasses. "But if you want to know, then I'll tell you."

"I do," Harry subsequently spent the rest of the day listening to Tonks talking. And he found that he was rather taken with the idea of becoming an Auror. "Do you think I could be an Auror when I grow up?"

"I don't see why not," Tonks checked her purse. "They'd probably just let you in anyway without the qualifications, and because of your Dad."

"I don't want something because of who I am," Harry scowled. "Or because of who my parents were." It was only after Harry had sulked for a few moments that he realized what Tonks had actually said. "My Dad?"

Tonks quickly cottoned on that Harry obviously had no idea about his father's former employment. "Your Dad was an Auror, Harry. And your granddad was as well. At one time Edward Potter actually ran Auror Division."

Harry recalled what Hermione had said to him about quidditch, and the fact that it was in his blood. "Do you think it's hereditary?"

"I doubt it," Tonks' stomach rumbled as she answered. "My Dad would never make an Auror. He's pretty messy and disorganized."

Tonks didn't add lazy because of her loyalty to her Dad, but even she had to admit to herself that he was a bit of sloth.

"What about your Mum?" Harry giggled when Tonks' stomach rumbled yet again.

"She's brilliant with all types of magic but it's never appealed to her," Tonks glanced around a living room that to her seemed far too tidy to be lived in, especially after her parents' home. "Do you have a coat?"

"Yeah," Harry opened the living room door. "It's upstairs. Are we going out?"

"No, I was thinking of wear a coat indoors," Tonks grinned at Harry. "I'm starving, and I hate cooking so we're going out for fish and chips. They're my favorite."

"I don't like them much," Harry admitted. "The fish always tastes funny."

"You're talking about Hogwarts' fish, aren't you?" Tonks had never been fond of it either.

"I've never had it anywhere else," Harry by now had reached the top of the stairs. "But I've been out to buy it for my relatives before so I know where the chip shop is."

Tonks, who hadn't been entirely filled in by Albus on Harry's background, frowned at Harry's statement. When he returned, she questioned his announcement. "What did you have if you didn't have fish and chips then?"

"Usually a sandwich or toast," Harry reached out to open the front door.

"Not so fast," Tonks stood in front of the door. "Are you telling me that you've never had fish and chips from a proper chip shop?"

"It doesn't matter now," Harry tried to brush over the long past misdemeanor.

"It most certainly does," Tonks huffed. "Fish and chips are the best food ever."

Harry relaxed as he realized that Tonks didn't know why Harry had never been bought fish and chips. "Shall we go and get some then? I've got some money."

"I'm paying," Tonks opened the door. "Come on."

The two weeks that Harry spent with Tonks were the best of his life. She unlocked Dudley's bedroom door, and showed Harry how to use the computer games; she let him stay up late a couple of times; they watched television together; and they ate out more than was good for either of them. But what Harry had loved most of all was the trips that Tonks took him on; the zoo; the Tower of London; the circus, where Tonks admitted she'd always wanted to ride on an elephant; the wizarding section of the British Museum - she felt that she ought to make at least one trip educational.

And it was two days before Tonks was due to leave, when she surprised Harry after he'd finished opening his cards and gifts from his friends. "It's your birthday, and I know it's not that exciting but I'm going to take you shopping, then we're going to go to a nice restaurant, and after that we're going to the movies."

"You don't have to do that," Harry protested, feeling a little embarrassed at the attention. "You've already taken me to lots of places."

"I like shopping, I'm always ready to eat, and there's a film on I want to see," Tonks found an excuse for everything. "So really you've just been invited along to do something I want to do."

Harry grinned widely at the older girl. "What film?"

"It's a surprise," Tonks had no idea what was showing at the cinema. "Come on. Get dressed and get back down here."

Tonks' main reason for taking Harry shopping was that she wasn't exactly impressed with his clothes; most of them were either threadbare or far too large. He had some decent clothing but overall it wasn't good.

Once he was dressed, Harry was escorted out of the house and up the street to the bus stop. "Do you like riding the bus?"

"Not particularly but I think people might talk if I apparate you to the shopping center," Tonks pointed out. "Now look sharp, there's a bus coming."

Within twenty minutes, the bus had reached the station, and Harry and Tonks alighted to make the two minute walk to The Belfry Shopping Centre, which had opened the previous year. Harry was then promptly dragged around Burtons, and Marks & Spencer, the bags growing ever more plentiful with each store they entered. "Tonks, I can't let you buy me all this."

"I can buy you whatever I like. It's your birthday," Tonks took the bags from Harry. "I'm just going into the ladies." When she came out, all of the bags but one had vanished, and Harry knew she'd shrunk them. "Why didn't you do anything with that one?"

"Because you're getting changed into the clothes in it," Tonks pointed to the men's bathroom. "Off you go, and throw away that outfit you're wearing."

Harry took the bag, and walked into the bathroom that Tonks had indicated. When he came out he was wearing a pair of jeans that actually fitted, a short-sleeved shirt, and lace-up boots. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Tonks was relieved to see the back of the unsuitable clothing. "So where do you want to eat?"

Harry thought about it for a moment, then he gave a sheepish grin. "Can we have fish and chips?" This would be the fifth time they'd eaten fish and chips if Tonks agreed to Harry's suggestion.

"Course," Tonks led Harry to the Supreme, a local fish & chip shop that had a small restaurant in the back. After they'd both stuffed themselves silly, Tonks opened up the newspaper that she'd bought. "Okay, the closest place is the Screen. We'll have to catch a bus. And tonight they're showing 'A League of their Own', and 'Man Trouble'. I think the first one would be the most suitable."

Harry enjoyed the movie, afterwards declaring 'Betty Spaghetti' to be his favorite character. "But I don't think I'd like to play baseball. It doesn't look as much fun as quidditch."

"I have to agree," Tonks smiled at Harry as the bus began its journey back towards Little Whinging. "You look tired."

"I am a bit," Harry, now being the grand old age of twelve, didn't want to admit that he just wanted his bed.

"Me too," Tonks curved an arm around Harry, who let his head drop onto his shoulder. She wasn't surprised that he fell asleep within minutes.

Harry waited anxiously as Tonks read the note that a large barn owl had delivered. "What time is Aunt Minnie coming?"

"She's not," Tonks folded the letter over. "Her goddaughter has had some complications because of Jasmine's birth, and Professor McGonagall will be staying for at least another week. She's asked if I can spend the next couple of days with you, and hand you over to Charlie."

"Will you?" Harry asked hopefully.

"You betcha," Tonks dropped the letter onto the table to join all the other post.

Harry looked around the house, and made a face at the mess. He knew that Petunia Dursley would have had a meltdown if she could have seen her house. Her once pristine counters in the kitchen now had pots and pans left over them, cereal packets that hadn't been put away were just dumped on them, and food stains where Tonks hadn't cleaned up properly were faintly visible. Washing was stacked up on the floor waiting to be cleaned. Papers, computer games, and magazines littered the floor of the sitting room, and the pizza box that had contained the pepperoni pizza they'd had the previous night, lay on the cherry coffee table.

At first, Harry had been a little alarmed, only too well aware of his Aunt's love of cleanliness but Tonks had simply shrugged and said that she'd deal with it before she handed him over to Minerva. Now

though, she'd promised to get it done before his relatives returned, as they were supposed to do on the day that Harry was due to leave.

Harry was actually hoping to miss them. Unfortunately that wasn't to be.

Petunia Dursley stepped into her home and wrinkled her nose at the stale smell. "Is anyone here?"

Harry, who'd just finished packing, came thundering down the stairs at the sound of the dreaded voice. "Hello, Aunt Petunia."

"Have you no idea what air freshener is, boy?" Petunia snapped. "Help Dudley with his luggage."

Harry was unceremoniously loaded up with a large suitcase. It felt as though Dudley was inside of it but the overweight boy's presence at the front door told Harry that it was obviously something else inside of the case. "Where should I put it, Aunt Petunia?"

"In his room, of course," Petunia snapped. "Now move."

Petunia stepped into her living room, and gave a small scream at the sight of it. "Potter, get down here."

Harry dropped the case at the top of the stairs. Dudley's door was now locked again, courtesy of Tonks, and he hadn't been able to take the case inside. "Coming, Aunt Petunia."

Harry stepped nervously into the sitting room. "I'm here."

"What do you call this?" Petunia pointed to the cushions that had been set up on her sofa. "They're the wrong cushions. And where are my pictures of Dudley from on top of the television?"

Harry guessed that Tonks had placed the wrong cushions on the wrong sofa. And they'd taken down the pictures because neither of them had wanted to have to look at Dudley while they watched TV. "I'll sort it out."

"I let him stay in my home, and this is how he treats it," Petunia grumbled as she headed into the kitchen.

Harry glanced over at Vernon who simply sneered at him while Harry replaced the cushions correctly. Harry winced when he heard Petunia's voice again. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my home?"

"I'm Harry's friend, Tonks," Tonks' voice drifted into the living room. "You must be Petunia Dursley."

"I'm Mrs. Dursley," Petunia emphasized the 'Mrs.'. "And I didn't say that Harry could have anyone else to stay."

"He's twelve," Tonks pointed out. "Do you really think he's old enough to stay on his own?"

"He should have gone somewhere else then if he didn't want to be alone," Petunia responded.

"Harry's guardian expected you to be here," Tonks found that she disliked Harry's Aunt immensely, and she'd only just met the woman.

"We can't be expected to rearrange our lives around that boy," Petunia's upper lip curled in disdain. "What happened to his guardian?"

"She had a family crisis," Tonks wasn't telling this woman about Minerva's private life. "So I stepped in."

"You're a bit young for taking care of a child, aren't you?" Petunia didn't give Tonks a chance to answer, and she went on. "But you can never tell how old you lot are."

Tonks' dislike was rapidly turning into hatred. "I'm old enough to take care of him."

"But obviously not my home," Petunia had turned to look at her kitchen, which while being sort of tidy, in no way resembled the pristine area that she had left. "I suppose you left it like this?"

"I could always do some more cleaning spells," Tonks offered.

"You will NOT do magic in this house!" Petunia hissed at the pink-haired girl. "And seeing as we're back, and the two weeks the boy

needs to stay here is up, I suggest that the two of you take your things and get out."

Tonks was finally beginning to understand Harry's reticence to see his relatives, as well as his nervous attitude, and she stalked out to the hallway, calling loudly, "Harry, we're leaving."

Harry hurried out to the hallway to join Tonks. "I'm coming."

Tonks ran upstairs and collected hers and Harry's luggage, ignoring Petunia's earlier demand that she don't do magic, as she shrank everything and slipped it into her pocket, and made her way out onto the landing to go back downstairs. "I think we can leave now."

It was then that Petunia realized that Tonks hadn't come out of the room at the top of the stairs. "Where did you two sleep?"

"Harry slept in your guest room," Tonks began, and on seeing Petunia's face going red with anger, she adopted a large smile, "and I slept in what was, I believe, your bedroom."

"How dare you touch my rooms with your filthy hands!" Petunia's face went puce.

Tonks hadn't liked the woman from the moment she'd first heard her speak, now she positively loathed her, and she experienced a wave of pity for Harry for ever having to live with such a vile family. "What else do you expect me to touch it with?"

With Petunia spluttering angrily behind her, Tonks opened the front door. She hesitated momentarily before smiling, and imparting one final piece of information to Petunia. "And by the way, your beds need changing. I'd have cleaned them magically but you told me not to use magic." Putting her arm around Harry's shoulders, she led the way out. "Come on."

Harry was too afraid to say anything to his Aunt. Only once they were clear of the house, did he say something. "She won't let me stay next year."

"You're better off without her," Tonks aimed a dirty glance back at the house. "Revolutionary woman." She then remembered that Petunia was Lily's sister. "Sorry, Harry."

"I don't like her much either," Harry admitted. "But I have to stay with her for two weeks."

"Why? She mentioned that as well." Tonks was now intrigued. "I thought this was a temporary thing while Professor McGonagall stayed with her goddaughter."

During the first few days that Tonks had been with him, Harry had quickly worked out that she had had no idea why he had to stay at the Dursleys, and Harry had therefore said nothing to her about it. But now Harry, who trusted Tonks implicitly, told her the truth while they walked down the street. "... and so Aunt Minnie is now my guardian but to keep me safe, I still have to stay with Aunt Petunia for two weeks every year. Although I doubt she'll have me back."

"She deliberately went away because she knew you were coming, didn't she?" Tonks asked. She'd originally thought that it had been a prearranged holiday but after meeting the woman, and listening to Harry, she now suspected differently.

"Yeah," Harry had no misconceptions about why Petunia had taken her family on holiday. "She hates me."

"Do you know why?" Tonks sat down on a swing when they reached the park.

"Because I can do magic," Harry sat down as well, and began swinging backwards and forwards. "And she can't."

"She's jealous then," Tonks deduced. "Was it only your Mum who could do magic in the family?"

"I think so," Harry glanced over at the housing estate from where they'd just walked; he could see his cousin coming their way. "Just great. Dudley is on his way over."

"Do the two of you get along?" Tonks thought probably not, but she still asked.

"No way," Harry shook his head. "He usually picks on me."

"Well he won't be able to do that now," Tonks assured Harry. "I'm here."

"That won't bother him," Harry had seen Dudley have a go before despite a child's older sibling being present. "You're a girl."

"Is that so?" Tonks smirked. "Stay here." Tonks then jumped up, and ran over to a clump of bushes, disappearing behind them.

Harry wondered what she was doing, and he called out, "Tonks?"

No-one answered, and Harry reluctantly turned back to face Dudley, who by then had reached him. "I thought you were leaving, Potter."

Harry sighed resignedly. "What do you want, Dudley?"

"I know you went in my room, freak," Dudley prodded Harry in the chest. "And I'm going to make you sorry."

Tonks had had some influence on Harry, and remembering what his father and grandfather had been, Harry stood up, fully intending to face off against his childhood tormentor. "Aren't you forgetting something, Dudley?"

"What?" Dudley pushed Harry back onto the swing.

"I can do magic," Harry reminded Dudley before the bigger boy could hit him. "I could turn you into a frog or anything."

Dudley hesitated for a moment, before remembering what his Mum had told him. "You can't do magic out of school, so I'm going to kick your arse, Potter."

"Ahem," A deep cough interrupted the two boys.

Dudley swiveled around to come face to face with one of the biggest boys he'd ever seen. "Who are you?"

"Someone who doesn't like bullies," The boy responded. "How about you try me on for size instead of picking on the shrimp?"

Harry had never seen the boy before, but something about his voice rang a bell. "Do I know you?"

"You might," The boy gestured towards Dudley. "Now, is he bothering you?"

Harry looked up at an ashen Dudley, and he nodded. "A little."

"It was just a bit of fun," Dudley backed away. "Potter's my cousin."

Harry got to his feet, enjoying the show. "I am his cousin but he doesn't like me."

"Then perhaps I should teach him a lesson," the bigger boy slapped his fist into the palm of his hand, "and kick his arse all the way home."

Dudley took one last look at Harry before turning on his heel and fleeing. The bigger boy immediately dropped down onto the swing behind him, and started to howl with laughter.

Harry didn't know what to make of this stranger, and he sat down again. "Thanks for stepping in." He glanced at the bushes. "You didn't see a girl with pink hair, did you?"

"I might have," the boy snorted with laughter again.

Harry was about to ask where when the boy's features began to change, and there before his eyes, sat Tonks. "How did you do that?"

Tonks giggled at Harry's astounded look, sounding much more feminine now. "I'm something called a Metamorphmagus. I can change my features, and if I try really hard, my voice."

"That's brilliant," Harry was in awe of Tonks' skill. "Can you teach me how to do it?"

"It can't be taught, Harry," Tonks said regretfully. "It's something you're born being able to do."

"That sucks," Harry was filled with disappointment.

Tonks looked at her watch. "And that ends our fun for today. It's time to go."

Harry looked expectantly at Tonks. "How are we getting there?"

"Hold my hand," Taking Harry's hand firmly in her own, Tonks glanced around, spotting people. "On second thoughts, come into the bushes."

Harry let her tug him into the bushes, and he then felt the familiar tug of a portkey. When he arrived, he was in a place he'd never been before. "Where exactly are we?"

"Romania, hopefully," Tonks waved a greeting to a woman who was coming their way. "Hello. Is Charlie around?"

The woman nodded. "He is." She then smiled at Harry. "Hello again."

"Hello," Harry greeted Tula, the woman who'd accompanied Charlie to collect Roger. "Thanks for letting me stay."

Tula grinned. "You're welcome but you should know that you are going to be earning your stay, Harry. Charlie told me that this was a punishment for something you'd done at school."

"Yeah," Harry scuffed the ground with his boot. "But I'm looking forward to it."

Like Charlie, Tula knew how much hard work caring for the dragons was. "I bet you'll be begging to go home by the end of the week." She started to walk back towards a large enclosure. "Come on, I'll show you where you're staying." She stopped and pointed to a shed. "Charlie's in there."

Tonks could see that Harry was comfortable in Tula's presence, and she therefore headed over to the shed, knocking on the outside of it before entering. "Charlie?"

Charlie swung around from cleaning a shovel. "Tonks? What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking after Harry," Tonks stepped up to where rows and rows of tools were lined up. "Didn't Professor Dumbledore tell you?"

"Yes, but I was expecting Professor McGonagall," Charlie placed the shovel in a gap on the second row.

"A shovel?" Tonks didn't explain about Minerva's absence.

"Some of the dragons react badly to magic so we have to use Muggle tools and methods to take care of them." Charlie explained, and then again asked after Minerva. "Is Professor McGonagall alright?"

Tonks explained why Minerva wasn't there. "So unfortunately you have to put up with me."

"So where's Harry?" Charlie started to lead the way back out into the daylight.

"With a woman who's showing him where he's going to be sleeping," Tonks fell into step beside Charlie, lengthening her legs to keep up with him. "She and Harry appeared to know each other."

"That would be Tula," Charlie pushed open the enclosure door, before closing it again after Tonks entered. "Welcome to Dragon Reserve."

"That was hardly original," Tonks remarked on the name, as she took in the large wooden enclosures. "They're made of wood, Chaz."

"Don't call me that," Charlie hated the nickname Tonks had given him at school. "And they've been fireproofed. Wood is plentiful, and can be replaced easily."

"Sorry, Charles," Tonks response was full of sarcasm.

"And don't call me that either," Charlie stopped walking. "You're one of the few people I know who really pisses me off without trying, Nymie."

Tonks scowled. "Don't you call me that."

"Then use my proper name," Charlie grinned at the person who'd come running over to him. "Harry, you're here."

"Charlie!" Harry hugged the redhead, before flashing a cheeky grin at Tonks. "Nymie?"

"Don't go there, Harry," Tonks warned. "So can I leave you here now?"

Harry's smile vanished, and he threw himself at Tonks. "Thanks for looking after me."

Tonks hugged Harry hard, kissing the top of his head. "No problem, Baby Bro."

Unlike Charlie, Harry had grown to like the nickname she'd bestowed upon him. "I'll miss you."

"I'll write," Tonks promised, before sliding her arm around Harry's shoulders. "Make sure you take good care of Harry, Chaz."

"He'll be in safe hands, Nymie," Charlie's response was as acerbic as Tonks. "See you!"

"Yeah," Tonks gave Harry one last hug. "Be good."

"I will," Harry's voice was choked with tears. He'd grown to love the quirky and slightly mad girl in the space of the two weeks he'd spent with her, and although he loved Charlie, he was going to miss her.

"Bye then," Tonks operated the portkey and vanished, leaving Harry in Charlie's care.

Charlie let out a long sigh of relief. "She drives me mad."

"I thought you were her friend," Harry was puzzled by Charlie's attitude. "Tonks said that you two were friends at school, even though she was in Hufflepuff."

"We were," Charlie ruffled Harry's hair. "But we rub each other up the wrong way sometimes."

Tula whispered something under her breath that Harry didn't catch, but Charlie obviously did, because he scowled at his boss. "I don't think so."

"Just commenting on the facts," Tula smirked, and she promptly changed the subject. "I think it's time for lunch. Harry, have you ever tried Ardei Umplutzi?"

Harry shook his head a little worriedly. "No, what is it?"

"It's sweet peppers stuffed with minced meat and rice," Charlie informed him. "We've got tocala, a type of stew, for dinner."

Harry was relieved when Charlie translated. "Sounds good."

"Come on then," Charlie led the way to the food tent. "I bet Ron is already forging his way through the meal."

"Ron's here already?" Harry glanced at the tent.

"He got here last night together with Fred and George," Charlie lifted the flap. "They're over there."

Harry shot over to where his friends were, leaving Charlie and Tula alone. "He seems happy to be here."

Charlie grinned. "He won't be by tomorrow night."

Harry groaned. "I'm going to die."

"You're not alone then." Fred joined in. He'd refused to let George go alone, and had decided to take the punishment with his twin. Only now he regretted it. "Why did I ever agree to this?"

"Coz you love me," George cackled, before groaning and dropping down onto his bed. "My pains have pains."

Charlie strode into the tent and caught the end of George's comment. "You do get used to it."

"If I never see a piece of dragon dung again then I'll be a happy person," George informed his older brother. "How can a baby dragon poop so much?"

"I thought the same thing when I first started," Charlie revealed. "Harry, how are you holding up?"

"I'm dead!" Harry announced dramatically. "Just make sure that they wash me before they bury me."

Charlie laughed out loud. "I'm afraid you'll be washing yourself. So go get showered, and then join us for dinner."

Ron opened up one eye at the sound of dinner. "Be right there," he promised as his brother left the tent.

Two hours later, after dinner had ended, Charlie made his way to the tent his brothers and Harry were in. All four boys were sound asleep, still fully clothed and in need of a shower. Pulling out his wand, he cast a cleaning spell on them, transfigured their clothes into pajamas, and left the tent.

The next morning the four boys were ravenous at breakfast. But by the end of the day, once more it was all they could do to make their way to their tent. This happened for the next few days but by the final day, they were all getting more used to the physical exercise. As they sat and ate breakfast, Charlie revealed a surprise. "For your last day you won't be mucking out."

"What will we be doing?" Harry didn't think anything could be much worse than mucking out, but he couldn't be sure.

"We're going to see the Berca mud volcanoes first," Charlie began, and using his hand began to recite what he had planned for them all. "And then we're going on a tour of what is called Bran Castle and was supposed to be the home of Dracula according to the Muggles."

The four boys burst out laughing, and George grinned at his brother. "I bet the Muggles would be shocked if they knew that Dracula preferred Diagon Alley, and that he was real."

"Probably, but they'd also have to know that Bram Stoker was a squib, and that our world exists." Charlie reminded his brother, before continuing to outline their day. "And finally, we're going to the Black Sea. You four can splash around, and I can relax before we have dinner tonight at a restaurant and then you'll portkey home."

"Am I going to Aunt Minnie's?" Harry checked.

"Yes, she'll be collecting you at the end of the day," Charlie clarified what would happen to Harry. "And this lot are going home. Now I suggest you all head off, grab a towel, and meet me back here in ten minutes."

Harry's last day was filled with fun, and he enjoyed playing in the sea the most. He was almost sorry when Minerva turned up, but after hugging Charlie, and promising him faithfully to be good at school, he dutifully slipped his hand into Minerva's and vanished with her.

Next Chapter: Harry returns to school; Severus has regrets.

Chapter 18: I Know You're a Witch

Harry's time with Minerva was soon over, and before he knew it, he was returning to the Weasleys for the final few days before school began to allow Minerva time to get things ready for the students' return. Smiling at Minerva, he hugged her. "Thanks, Aunt Minnie. I had a nice time."

Minerva suspected that Harry had had a boring time staying with her. She had mostly helped him with the work that had been assigned over the summer, surprising Harry with her expertise in potions. And they'd talked in general about quidditch and Harry's friends but nothing too personal, Harry avoiding any such conversation. "I'll take your trunk and Hedwig back to Hogwarts with me. Have you got everything you need in your weekend case?"

Harry patted the leather case that Minerva had bought him a few days previously. "Yes, thank you."

"Then I'll see you at school," Minerva handed Harry the portkey. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"I'll be okay," Harry wanted to do this on his own, and before he had a chance to say anything else, a familiar tug pulled him away from the house where he'd just spent the last few weeks. When his world stopped swirling, Harry found himself on his knees just outside of the Weasley homestead.

"Harry!" A girl's cry pierced the air. "You're back."

Harry got a little embarrassedly to his feet. "Hi, Ginny."

"Mum's out at the moment but she said to tell you that you're in Ron's room," During the short time that Harry had stayed in Ginny's room after his run-in with Quirrell, Ginny had managed to overcome her crippling shyness of him, and was now able to converse normally. However, she still thought the sun rose and set with Harry. "Come on, I'll take you up."

"Okay then," Harry followed Ginny inside and up the stairs. "Where's everyone else?"

"Ron's staying with Neville, Fred and George have gone to stay with Lee, and Percy's in his room," Ginny reeled off where her siblings were.

"What about Charlie?" Harry asked hopefully.

"He's still in Romania," Ginny pushed open Ron's door. "As you know, he doesn't get back much."

Harry hid his disappointment and placed his case on the floor. "Have you had a good summer? Luna said in her letters that you've been over there a lot."

"There wasn't much else to do," Ginny admitted. "But even Luna isn't there right now. She's gone Snorkack hunting again!"

Harry couldn't miss the look of disdain that crossed Ginny's face. "You don't believe in them, do you?"

"No! Who would?" Ginny was suddenly hit with the realization that Harry might. "Do you?"

"Not really," Harry answered in the negative. "And when I asked Aunt Minnie about them, she snorted."

Ginny laughed. "So 'Aunt Minnie' doesn't believe them in either then."

Harry shook his head. "No, she doesn't." Harry looked around. "Should I unpack?"

"There's room in that cupboard," Ginny pointed to a rather dilapidated cupboard that had been painted bright orange, presumably by Ron. "I'll help, and then we can go downstairs for some biscuits."

Harry let Ginny help him, before the two of them headed back downstairs. "I've never known it to be this quiet here."

"It's been boring," Ginny munched happily on a large chocolate biscuit that she grabbed out of the biscuit barrel, and changed the subject. "Do you have your broom with you?"

"Yes, Aunt Minnie shrank it for me," Harry had forgotten about it when he'd unpacked. "It's in the side pocket of my case."

"Could I... could I possibly have a go?" Ginny's face turned a pretty shade of pink, her newly found confidence in front of Harry receding a little from nerves.

"Course you can," Harry dashed back upstairs before returning with the miniaturized broomstick. "But your Mum will have to unshrink it."

Ginny smirked, her self-assurance returning in spades. "No, she won't." Aiming her wand at the broomstick, she used an enlarging spell. "There."

"But what about the underage magic restrictions?" Harry asked in a worried voice.

"This wand is second-hand," Ginny tucked it in her belt. "It belonged to Mum's Aunt Drusilla, and it therefore has no charms on it."

"Does my wand have a charm on it?" Harry pulled out his wand, examining it closely.

"Probably," Ginny was glad that hers did not; she would not have been able to practice any spells otherwise. "Dad said that the Ministry makes Ollivander put tracking and detection charms on all of his wands. Usually they're removed when you graduate or if you're an adult buying a second wand."

"Oh," Harry wasn't so sure he liked that, but he filed the information away to ask Hermione, who he knew would have some idea. "Let's go outside. You can go first."

Ginny didn't need telling twice, and grabbing Harry's broomstick from him, she hurried outdoors.

Harry watched Ginny for quite some time while she whipped around the large open field that surrounded the Burrow. "You're pretty good."

"I practice," Ginny yelled back, before she came down and landed. "Sorry, I shouldn't have hogged it for so long but it was fun to be able to practice on a decent broom for a change."

"How do you practice normally?" Harry asked as he took back his broomstick.

Ginny gave a guilty giggle. "I know how to pick locks. The twins taught me, so when Mum is out I use those skills to get me into the cupboard where the twins lock up their brooms. But they've taken their brooms with them to Lee's place so I haven't been able to use them."

"That's how you know you stand a chance at quidditch, isn't it?" Harry recalled the conversation that had taken place at Christmas.

"Yep," Ginny sat down on the rickety bench that flanked the field she'd been flying over. "It's your turn now."

"I won't be long," Harry got onto his broomstick and flew into the air. He'd almost forgotten how wonderful flying felt, Minerva's home being unsuitable for flying. Harry therefore spent nearly as much time as Ginny had in the air before touching down. "That was brilliant."

"Can you show me how you do that twist where you look as though you're going to go upside down?" Ginny had never seen a move like it before.

"Course I will. In fact you can ride with me," Harry hopped back onto his broomstick. "Get on behind me."

Ginny eagerly climbed on behind Harry and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm on."

"Hold tight," Harry warned, and then he left the ground, quickly gathering speed before he gained a little more height and tilted sideways with a strange wiggle before righting himself.

Ginny couldn't help but laugh with pleasure, and once they'd touched down, she tried the maneuver herself, managing a passable copy on her third attempt. Then she sank slowly back down to the ground. "I'm starving. Let's go back in and get some more biscuits."

Once inside, Harry took a custard cream, one of his favorites, and sat down on the sofa next to Ginny. "You really are pretty good on a broom."

Ginny grabbed another biscuit. "I know but I'm not famous like you so I doubt I'll get a chance at making the team as a first year."

"If you could get on a team I think you'd be a brilliant chaser," Harry commented, ignoring Ginny's remark about his being famous. "But Gryffindor already have really good chasers, and I think you'd have to become a reserve."

"What about Ravenclaw?" Ginny knew she wasn't clever enough for Ravenclaw, but she was still interested in their team.

"Their chasers are all pretty good, and none of them are leaving this year as far as I know," Harry wrinkled his forehead. "And you wouldn't want to be in Slytherin."

"No way," Ginny agreed with Harry.

"And I can't really see you getting into Hufflepuff," Harry continued. "Although we could do with more chasers."

Ginny's temper immediately flared up at Harry's rejection. "Why not? Aren't I good enough?"

"It isn't that," Harry worked to calm her down. "It's just that most of the people in Hufflepuff are really quite quiet, and even though you seem that way at first, you're really not."

"So I'm noisy as well as not good enough?" Ginny snarled, having turned bright red with anger.

"No, but you're quite, err, quite, err..." Harry struggled for the right words, his face a picture of worry and dismay.

Seeing how distressed Harry had become, Ginny quickly recognized that unlike her brothers might have done, Harry wasn't trying to be mean to her, and she therefore relented. "It's alright, Harry. I know what you mean."

Harry let out a relieved puff of air. "I was worried I'd upset you."

"Not really," Ginny rose to her feet. "Come on, I promised Mum I'd peel potatoes before she got home, and she's due back in fifteen minutes."

Glad to have the subject steered in a different direction, Harry followed Ginny into the kitchen.

"Are you sure you've got everything, Harry?" Molly fussed around the dark-haired boy.

"Aunt Minnie's already taken pretty much of all my stuff, Mrs. Weasley," Harry picked up his small case. "This is all I need. Mr. Weasley shrank my broomstick last night."

"Good, then we're all set," Molly opened the door. "Harry, you can ride with Ginny and the trunks. I'll ride with Percy. I'm just glad that Ron and the twins aren't here. This would have been a madhouse."

Harry knew that despite her words, Molly had missed her other children, and that she would have been happy to see them there. He stepped aside as Percy officiously swept through. Harry didn't really know the older boy that well, and to be truthful, had no desire to either. Hiding a grin at Ginny's eyebrow waggling, Harry followed the younger girl into the taxi.

A short time later they were all safely on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and Harry spotted Susan. "Susan!"

Molly winced at the loud yell. "Harry, please."

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley," Harry had had to raise his voice to make himself heard over the noise of the people on the platform.

Susan came barreling over. "Harry, I missed you."

Harry wrapped the girl in a bear hug, missing the jealous look that crossed Ginny's face. After releasing Susan, he smiled. "It wasn't the same just writing, was it?"

"Not really," Susan then remembered her manners, and she held out her hand towards Mrs. Weasley. "It's nice to see you again."

"And you," Molly ignored the hand and gave Susan a hug. "And you remember Ginny."

"Of course," Susan held out her hand again.

This time it was accepted, and Ginny shook it briefly. "Did you have a good summer?"

"It was amazing," Susan gushed. "Aunt Amy took me to Australia with her. She was lecturing to the Sydney and Adelaide Auror Divisions about BritAD's latest techniques. Next year they're coming here to do the same, so I won't have to go away. And Aunt Amy said to tell you that you're going to be staying with us, Harry."

Harry didn't get a chance to respond, because Molly checked the time. "I think you'd better get onboard." Molly pulled Ginny into a hug. "Promise me that you'll be a good girl, and don't get worrying about what house you get into."

"I won't," Ginny hugged her mother back. "I'll see you at Christmas."

"I wish I'd seen your brothers," Molly had been looking for the twins and Ron ever since they'd arrived a few minutes earlier but the taxis had been delayed in traffic, and now there was barely a minute to spare.

"I'll tell them to write to you," Harry offered.

"Thank you, Harry," Molly hugged Harry. "You try and keep out of trouble this year."

"I will, Mrs. Weasley," Harry turned and opened the closest door. "We'd better get on."

After shoving their trunks into the empty carriage, Susan and Ginny climbed quickly inside, and Harry got in behind them. No sooner had he done so than the train let out an almighty whistle, and the conductor yelled out, "Final call. All aboard."

The last few stragglers hurriedly joined their friends onboard the train, and moments later the bright red locomotive belched out a puff of steam and began to pull out of the station.

Harry and Ginny sat down together after waving at Molly. "Where was your aunt, Susan?"

"She left just before you arrived," Susan removed her lightweight jacket. "I was about to get on the train when you called me."

"I wonder where Justin and Hermione are," Harry debated whether he should get up and go look for them.

He didn't have to, for a few minutes into the journey, they came to him. After an exchange of hugs, an introduction to Ginny, and a removal of personal items from the carriage the two of them had been seated in, Hermione and Justin stowed their things in Harry's carriage, and Hermione gratefully sat down. "Where's Hedwig?"

"Aunt Minnie took her," Harry glanced at the cage that Justin was toting. "When did you get her?"

"She's a he!" Justin poked a finger through the cage, and tickled the head of the mottled brown owl. "Mother bought Sherlock for me as an early birthday present because she won't see me in November."

Justin's mention of birthdays made Harry remember his own. "Thanks for the new shirts you sent me." Harry's quidditch shirt had been damaged when he'd been ploughed into the ground in the game against Slytherin; Justin had sent him a set of two for his birthday. "And the broom polishing kit was brilliant, Hermione."

"Hedwig turned up out of nowhere," Hermione repeated for Justin and Susan what had happened. "I was in France wondering how I was going to get Harry's gift to him, when I heard a hoot, and there she was. What did you get him?"

Unlike almost everything else he'd received, Susan's gift to Harry had not been quidditch orientated. "Harry has a visitor's pass for the whole of next summer so that he can have a look around the Ministry and British Auror Division. Aunt Amy signed off on it."

"A pass?" Hermione queried. "I thought anyone could go into the Ministry."

"They can," Susan explained. "But only authorized visitors can go into BritAD and also see the Minister's office. And..."

"You're going to get to see the Minister's office?" Hermione squawked, interrupting Susan. "You're so lucky."

"I've already seen it," Ginny joined in with the conversation. "Dad showed it to me sneakily one day when he took me into work. But I was pretty young, and don't really remember that much about it."

"I'm more interested in seeing Auror Division," Harry wasn't that concerned about visiting the Minister's office. "Nymie said that they have cells and combat rooms."

"Nymie?" Hermione queried the name.

Harry grinned. "It was what Charlie called Tonks. She hated it. I think it suits her but I'd never call it her to her face."

"You really liked her, didn't you?" Susan could see the joy on Harry's face.

"She's brilliant. She was so much fun, and she made Aunt Petunia look really stupid," Harry then launched into a tale about the fortnight he'd spent at his relatives' home, and how Tonks had treated Petunia on her return.

Hermione, who was usually such a stickler for obeying authority, was delighted. Even though it seemed to others that she was a bit of suck-up towards teachers and her elders, Hermione's respect was only genuine where it was truly deserved, or when she didn't have much option in a matter, such as in potions class. "Serves her right."

Justin too, was glad that Petunia had been set down by Tonks, but he was more interested in something else that had come up. "You'd really never had fish and chips before? They didn't even let you have it once?"

"They'd never pay for it. They actually said I didn't deserve such a treat," Harry didn't mind telling his friends what he hadn't initially told Tonks.

"Well you won't have that problem at BritAD; they serve great fish and chips there, and I bet you'll get to try them at least once," Susan announced. She could see that she'd lost everyone, except for Harry.

"Harry is going to be spending two weeks sitting in on classes and stuff like that."

"Will you be there as well?" Ginny asked, a little jealous of Harry and Susan's obviously good friendship.

"No, it's just for Harry," Susan wasn't particularly interested in attending, not even to spend time with Harry. "So I won't see him during the day, but I will at night. He'll be staying at our house for the fortnight. Aunt Amy said that Professor McGonagall has already said yes." Susan addressed her next remark purely to Harry. "It's set up for after the fortnight you're going to have to spend with your relatives."

Harry pulled a face. "I was hoping that they wouldn't take me back."

Susan gave Harry the bad news. "Sorry, but Aunt Amy said that they've already agreed to it." Harry had no idea that the only reason Petunia had agreed to allow him back the next year was because she'd been reminded that she'd lose the money she got for taking Harry in if she didn't.

"That's a shame," Justin commiserated with Harry. "Perhaps they'll let you have someone stay with you. I wouldn't mind doing it."

"I've already asked Aunt Amy if I could stay with Harry," Susan went rather red. "But Harry's relatives said that they wouldn't allow anyone else to stay there."

"Darn it, it would have been much better if I could have had a friend there." Speaking of friends being there made Harry realize that one of his friends was missing from the carriage. "That reminds me, I almost forgot about Luna. I'd better go and look for her."

Ginny waved off his suggestion. "She'll be okay. I expect she's probably with some of the other first years."

Harry wavered, not really wanting to have to contend with a group of first year girls who, if his experiences so far remained true, Harry knew would be falling over themselves to meet him, and he therefore sat back down. "Perhaps I'll wait until we get to Hogwarts then." But after a short time, he decided that he couldn't just ignore

the fact that the girl was on the train, and he got back up. "I'm going to look for Luna. If she's busy, I can just wave and keep on walking."

Harry then left the carriage, but the first person he came across wasn't Luna, it was Ron. "Hi ya."

"Harry!" Ron was delighted to see his friend, and pumped his hand vigorously. "Where are you sitting?"

"Fourth carriage from the front with Justin and the girls," Harry glanced over Ron's shoulder into the window of the carriage the redhead had just exited; Dean and Seamus were in there, together with Neville. "How was your holiday with Neville?"

Ron was aware that Neville could hear him, and he mouthed silently 'tell you later' before raising his voice. "It was really good." Harry was to find out later that it had been rather boring with Neville's grandmother expecting both boys to exercise a modicum of decorum in the house at all times.

Sitting in the carriage, Neville was pleased at Ron's response, and he smiled brightly when Harry entered the carriage alone, Ron having continued to his original destination, the loo. "Hi, Harry."

"Neville, Seamus, Dean," Harry greeted each boy before sitting down at Seamus' request. "How are you all?"

All three boys informed Harry that they were okay, and then Dean drew Seamus into a separate conversation, allowing Harry to talk to Neville. "So are you really okay? That was a pretty big hole that Quirrell blew in your leg."

"I'm okay now," Neville was aware that he owed Harry an apology; he'd already apologized to George and Ron, but he hadn't had a chance to speak to Harry yet. "Harry, I'm sorry you got hurt because I went after the Stone."

"You weren't to know what would happen, and I'm better now," Harry assured him, but he was more interested in something else. "Nev, do you remember what happened yet?" As he spoke, Harry noticed that Seamus and Dean seemed to be paying more attention to his and Neville's conversation than their own, and he therefore kept his voice low. "Charlie told me that you had no idea of what went on."

"The last thing I remember is going through the flames," Neville answered honestly. "After that it's just a blank."

"Quirrell said you helped him," Harry revealed, waiting for Neville's reaction.

"I'd never have helped him." Neville glared at Harry. "You don't think I'd have helped him, do you?"

"No, of course not," Harry gave the answer he knew Neville expected from him.

Neville still wasn't sure Harry believed him, and he pointed something out. "If I was supposed to have helped Quirrell, why didn't Gran tell me? She said that I'd stood up to him."

"I didn't tell anyone what Quirrell had told me," Harry was still more than half-convinced that Neville had not been as brave as his Gran obviously thought he had been. "I wasn't sure if he was lying or not, and I didn't want to get you into any trouble, so I didn't tell anyone what he'd said."

"Well, he was lying," Neville hurriedly spat out.

Harry could see that Neville was troubled by what he'd just said. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone what he said."

"Thanks," Neville was thoroughly relieved when Ron came back in a few moments later, and he hurriedly changed the subject, raising his voice so that everyone could hear. "Ron's thinking about trying out as seeker."

Seamus, who had been straining to hear the discussion between the two boys, grinned happily at Ron, "That's brilliant, Ron. What made you decide to have a go?"

Ron hadn't wanted to tell anyone about his decision until he'd made up his mind for sure, but now he had little choice. "Nev seems to think I'd be good at it."

Being a good friend, and remembering that Ron had been able to catch the bird key when George hadn't been able to, Harry backed up Neville. "I think you stand a good chance."

Harry's words of encouragement were all Ron needed. "In that case, I'll have a go."

"It'll be fun," Harry enthused. "We can practice together."

Even though he'd promised himself in his mind that he wouldn't try and stop Ron from spending time with Harry, Neville discovered that in reality the very opposite was true. "Won't that be considered cheating since you're both in different houses?"

Ron and Harry both looked at each other, before Seamus shrugged and spoke up. "Nah, everyone knows that Harry and Ron are mates."

In the wake of Seamus' comment, Neville had little choice except to subside. "I suppose."

As silence fell over the boys, Harry remembered his original reason for leaving his own carriage, and he got to his feet. "I'd better go. I'm supposed to be looking for Luna. Have you seen her, Ron?"

Ron shook his head. "Sorry, mate. See you later."

"See you," Harry drew to a halt, having just remember his promise to Mrs. Weasley. "Ron, you have to write to your Mum."

Ron grimaced; he hated writing. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry knew how much Ron hated it, and he grinned before closing the carriage door behind him, and he continued down the train until he found Luna sitting alone. He slid open the door. "Hi, Luna. Aren't you with any friends?"

"No," Luna's voice was rather forlorn. "Two girls did sit with me when I first got on the train but after we'd been talking for a while, they suddenly remembered they were supposed to be somewhere else."

Harry now felt guilty for not seeking her out earlier. "Sorry, I should have come and looked for you sooner."

"I suppose you didn't want everyone staring at you," Luna deduced quite correctly.

"I didn't," Harry had had a few uncomfortable moments when he'd passed several groups, and whispering had sprung up. "Do you want to come and sit with us? I'm sitting with Justin, Hermione, Susan, and Ginny near the front of the train."

"I'm really alright here," Luna said bravely. "You don't have to look after me."

For once, a usually obtuse Harry read between the lines, and tugged Luna's trunk from under the seat. "Follow me."

A now smiling Luna followed the boy she considered her best friend. Once inside the carriage where Harry's friends were, she waved at the children sitting there. "Hello everyone, I'm Luna Lovegood."

Hermione took in the girl's rather haphazard clothing, the strange necklace she was wearing that appeared to be made of teeth, and what could only be her wand sticking out of her hair, and immediately decided that the girl was as batty as her letters to Harry made her out to be. But she was a polite girl, and she therefore stood up with her hand held out. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"You're in Gryffindor, aren't you?" Luna shook Hermione's hand.

Hermione thought it rather obvious seeing as she was wearing a Gryffindor tie, but she didn't comment on it. "I am. What house do you want to get into?"

"Hufflepuff so that I can be with Harry but I know I'm going into Ravenclaw," Luna announced.

Hermione's face was a picture. "How do you know that?"

"My Mum told me before she died, and I wrote about it in a dream," Luna blithely informed Hermione.

Hermione's initial belief that Luna was batty was now reinforced. "You wrote about it in a dream?"

"Yes," Luna announced in a bright and happy voice. "Someone was writing about me, and they were going to put me in Gryffindor, but I didn't like how the story was going, so I changed it."

"Okay," Hermione shared a look with Ginny, who was doing her best to hide her giggles.

Luna didn't notice the shared look, and she went on to greet both Susan and Ginny personally. "Hi Susan, Ginny."

Both girls bid her hello, before Luna turned her beaming smile on an almost frightened looking Justin. "You're Justin, aren't you?"

"Yes," Justin held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Can I sit next to you?" After shaking his hand, Luna sat down without waiting for Justin to answer.

Ginny smothered yet another snort of laughter at the look on Justin's face, and she answered for him. "You can sit wherever you want, Luna."

"Thanks, Ginny," And with that, Luna whipped out a magazine and began to read it.

Justin recognized it as the Quibbler, but not really wanting to talk to the girl, he wisely declined from commenting on the fact that Luna was holding the magazine upside down.

It obviously didn't bother Luna; she continued to read the magazine, and the conversation began to turn to more mundane things, and before the children knew where the time had gone, the train had arrived in Hogsmeade.

Once they'd gotten off, Harry could hear Hagrid calling out to the first years. "Luna, you and Ginny should leave your trunks, and head down to the boats. Just follow Hagrid over there."

Ginny held out her hand to Luna, who was standing watching everyone with a somewhat bemused look on her face. "Come on, Luna. We don't want to get left behind."

The two girls disappeared into the distance, and Harry and the others headed for the carriages that all the students, except for first years, used to get to the school. Once inside the school it was fun for them to watch the first years head into the Great Hall to be sorted. As she had predicted, Luna was sorted in Ravenclaw, and she waved to Harry as she skipped to her table.

The final person to be sorted was Ginny, and she climbed hesitantly onto the stool when her name was called, visibly jumping when a voice spoke to her. "Who is that?"

"I'm the Sorting Hat," The Hat told Ginny what it inevitably ended up telling all of the new students. "You don't need to talk out loud. I can hear your thoughts."

Ginny immediately went red. "All of them?"

"All of them," the Hat confirmed. "And you want to go into Hufflepuff, don't you?"

"Yes, please," Ginny's thoughts were full of hope.

"But I believe you'd do much better in Gryffindor," The Hat was reluctant to place Ginny in a different house. "All of your family has been in it."

Ginny recalled what Bill had said at Christmas. "You wanted to put my brother Bill into Slytherin, but he said he refused you."

"So he did," the Hat acknowledged, "but I stand by my initial decision; William would have made an excellent addition to that house."

Ginny's thoughts became quite bossy. "Well if you let him choose, I want to as well."

The Hat chuckled. "It's your determination that makes me believe you should be in Gryffindor, and following your own path, young lady."

"No," Ginny refused. "I want to go into Harry's house."

Since Ginny was the last to be sorted and the numbers were pretty evenly divided between the four houses, the Hat relented. "Very well then, but you should know that you can't change your mind once I've declared which house you are to go into."

Ginny didn't care about that, she was going to be in Harry's house. "I want to be in Hufflepuff."

"Then I shall grant your wish," the Hat said to Ginny before it called out, "HUFFLEPUFF".

On the Gryffindor table Percy and Ron were both stunned. The twins, however, weren't. George grinned at Fred. "I told you she'd manage it."

Fred scowled as he handed over two sickles. "I can't believe she actually talked the Hat around into letting her go into Hufflepuff."

"How do you know she did?" Ron challenged his brother's supposition.

"Because it should have been a foregone conclusion that she was in Gryffindor. But I could she was obviously arguing with the Hat," Fred grumbled.

"But why on earth would she prefer Hufflepuff over Gryffindor?" Percy asked in a disgusted voice.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Wake up, Perce! We all know why she wanted to go into Hufflepuff, or should I say who she wanted to go into Hufflepuff for."

When Percy continued to look blankly at them, George, Fred, and Ron all chorused "Harry" at the same time. Percy's nose wrinkled. He didn't like the boy, and had done his best to avoid him at the Burrow. "Potter's trouble and I don't think I want my sister running after him."

"You're about ten years too late," Fred sniggered.

George agreed with him. "Yeah, but it isn't Ginny I'm worried about, it's Harry."

Percy frowned. "Why are you worried about him?"

George thought that for someone who was academically gifted, Percy was sometimes rather stupid when it came down to the world in general. "Because somehow I don't think he'll be too impressed if Gin moons all over him here at school with everyone watching them."

"He'll manage," Fred's despondency over losing to George began to vanish as he thought about how tenacious his young sister was. "And if he doesn't, then at least it won't be our fault."

"Too right," George shared the same grin with Fred before turning his attention to Albus Dumbledore's speech, which already begun.

"...and because of Professor Quirrell's unfortunate passing last term, we have had to find a new teacher to take his place," Albus smiled heartily. "I'm going to apologize to those of you who have examinations this year because your new teacher, at least for this year, will be me."

Roars of approval ripped through the Hall, Fred putting his fingers into his mouth and whistling his endorsement. George called out instead. "Why only this year, Sir?"

"I had hoped to engage a well-known wizard, much learned in the art of defense," Albus began as he answered George's question. "Unfortunately Gilderoy Lockhart was unable to take up the position at this time due to his upcoming book tour."

Sighs and moans of disappointment from the girls almost drowned Albus out. He held up both hands. "Now quiet down. All is not lost. Mr. Lockhart has agreed to take on the position as from next year."

Screams of joy far louder than the sighs of disappointment filled the room as most of the girls went wild. Even Hermione had a slightly dopey look on her face. "He's absolutely brilliant. I've read all of his books."

George scowled at her. "He's an idiot."

"I have to disagree," Hermione hissed at him. "Just read his books. You'll see that he's nothing of the sort."

"It's all rubbish," George hissed back.

"You're just jealous," Hermione retorted, before turning her attention back to the Headmaster, who was reintroducing the staff.

George pulled a face as Severus Snape rose. "Why couldn't he have passed over with Quirrell?"

As if he knew he was being talked about, Severus glowered in George's direction, before sitting down. He hated the start of term, and Severus wanted nothing more than to leave the Great Hall, retire to his room, and read a good book. Thinking of a good book focused Severus' mind on another book, one he had brought to Hogwarts with him for a purpose. No longer listening to Albus, he let his mind drift back to just before he'd left for Hogwarts.

Two Days Earlier

Severus Snape entered the room that served as his study in the small and dingy house that he'd lived in for most of his life. Once inside the room, he headed to the far wall. Pointing his wand at what appeared to be a wall sconce, he cast several spells, and then placed his hand around the sconce, and tugged. A click was heard, and a small portion of wall slid back, allowing Severus access to what was inside. After withdrawing the object, Severus ran his hand over it.

To an onlooker it would have appeared simply to be a very plain book. On closer observation, one would have noted that it was actually a diary. And if one had continued to watch, then they would have seen Severus open the diary to reveal blank pages, and all interest would have been lost. Unless of course an onlooker had any curiosity as to what they believed Severus might confess to the diary. Again they would have been disappointed for all he wrote after sitting down was "It's time."

An onlooker's attention might have been regained though if they had continued to observe, for although the words maintained their integrity for a moment, they soon sank into the page and vanished. And then a response came back. "Do not fail me."

Severus laid down his quill, closed the diary, and placed it on top of his personal items that he was taking to Hogwarts with him. Then he went to close the lid, only to hesitate. Instead of continuing to close the lid, Severus instead lifted the diary back out. He ran a hand over it, and, despite his conversation with the diary's entrapped guest, Severus debated whether he should take it to school with him.

After the end of the last school year, he was aware that he would find it difficult to explain the diary's existence if anyone, particularly Dumbledore, ever discovered what the diary was. And after the Quirrell incident, Dumbledore would be overly protective of Potter. Severus' mouth tightened at the thought of the dark-haired boy. By rights he, and that idiot Longbottom, should have been dead, but it had all gone horribly wrong in the mirror room, and Quirrell had instead paid the ultimate price. Shaking off his doubts, Severus replaced the diary in trunk and closed it, before leaving the room.

Present Time

As he listened to the Headmaster, Severus pondered how he was going to place the diary upon Potter's person. A cruel smile played across his lips until he stupidly allowed himself to consider how Lily would feel about her son losing his soul, and probably his life. He didn't want to think about her! But it was too late. Severus' mind wouldn't let him escape his thoughts, and Albus again faded into the background as Severus found himself remembering the very first time he'd met Lily Evans.

23rd June 1969

Severus glanced up from the book he was reading and his attention was immediately caught by two redheaded girls. He sat up straighter as he watched one of them playing with a leaf. The taller girl, another redhead, nudged the shorter one, and the girl's voice drifted over to Severus on the wind. "Creepy is looking at you."

The shorter redhead turned around and met Severus' gaze before looking away. "He's not hurting me, Tunia."

"Come on, we should go home," Petunia Evans grabbed her younger sister's hand, and tried to tug her away.

"We don't have to be in for over an hour," the much smaller girl protested, "and Mum said we could stay out longer if we stayed by the house."

"But what if he comes over, Lils?" Petunia persisted, tugging much harder now.

"I can always run," Lily suggested. "If you want to go in, then go. I'm staying out."

Petunia gave up, and released her sister. "I'm telling Mum."

"kay," Lily was aware that her mother, Gladys, could see her from the kitchen window if she craned her neck hard enough. But she doubted her mother would stop her from talking to the boy.

Lily waited until Petunia had gone indoors. Only then did she slowly walk over to the boy and introduce herself. "Hello, I'm Lily."

"I'm Severus but I thought you couldn't talk to me," Severus nodded towards the house that Petunia had just entered. "I could hear her."

"Tunia's a bossy boots," Lily sat down on the tree stump next to Severus. "What are you reading?"

"A book," Severus didn't enlighten her as to the title, and he placed the book face down on the ground. "What were you doing with that leaf?"

Lily's face immediately took on a frightened look. "Nothing."

"You were doing magic, weren't you?" Severus challenged Lily's lie. "I saw you."

Lily shook her head. "No I wasn't."

"I know you were," Severus countered. "It's okay, I won't tell anyone I saw you doing it."

Lily hesitated for a moment before admitting to the truth. "kay. But I didn't know it was magic. I just know that I can sometimes make things move." She stared suspiciously at Severus. "How do you know what I was doing anyways?"

"Because I know lots about magic," Severus announced in a lofty voice, before making an all important announcement. "And I know you're a witch."

Lily's bottom lip began to tremble, and tears started to fill her large green eyes. "That's a mean thing to call me."

It was at that moment that the nine year-old Severus Snape lost his heart forever as he took in the forlorn and hurt look on Lily's face, and he hurriedly tried to make it right. "I'm not calling you names. A witch is a girl who can do magic."

"But witches are really ugly," Lily protested, "and they have big noses and warts, and... and... and everything!"

Severus wasn't surprised that Lily thought that. It was a misconception that most Muggles had. "Not all of them." He glanced around. "Shall I tell you a secret?"

Lily's tears stemmed momentarily, her red hair flying around her head as she nodded. "What is it?"

"I'm a wizard," Severus proudly declared. "I can do magic just like you."

"Prove it," Lily demanded.

Severus got to his feet, and stepped around the tree. "Come here."

Lily hesitated, her sister's words coming back to haunt her. "I don't know if I should."

"I won't hurt you," Severus held out his hand. "I just want to show you something."

Lily looked into Severus' black eyes, and she found no malice, only pleading, and she took Severus' hand, letting him pull her into the shade of the tree, and out of sight of her house. "Show me then."

Severus pulled out his wand, which to Lily looked like a thin stick, and he aimed it at Lily, who immediately shied away, thinking he was going to hit her with it. "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

"I won't. This is my wand," Severus waved the wooden stick around, and before Lily could protest, the words of one of the few spells he was really good at came spilling from his lips. "Wingardium Leviosa."

Lily gave a tiny scream as she left the ground. "Put me down. Put me down."

Severus immediately cancelled the spell. "I'm sorry."

White and shaking, Lily backed away. "I have to go." Then, like a frightened deer, she turned and ran.

Present Time

Severus slowly came back to himself, and he forced himself to concentrate on what Albus was currently saying. While he did so, he looked around the Great Hall, his eyes almost automatically seeking Potter out. The memory had made him realize that he couldn't place the diary on the boy. Even though she was dead, Severus couldn't bear to think what Lily would think of him if he did.

He therefore began to survey the Great Hall until his gaze fell upon that idiot Longbottom who was sitting by the know-it-all Granger. Severus debated whether he should slip it into one of their bags during class. But he knew that he wouldn't have wanted to listen to Longbottom's inane drivel, nor Granger's incessant questioning, and his Master wouldn't thank him for such an action. Severus therefore decided that the diary would need a different victim.

Next Chapter: Ron tries out for seeker; We learn more about Severus' past with Lily; Albus cautions Severus.

Chapter 19: A Lost Opportunity

Still in his quidditch gear, Harry sat down next to Hermione, who had been the only one of his circle of friends not to watch the Hufflepuff quidditch trials. "Hi."

"How did you do?" Hermione could see that Harry was obviously excited.

"I'm seeker again for Hufflepuff," Harry gave her a large smile. "And Justin is the reserve."

"What about Diggory?" Hermione knew that the good-looking fourth year had also been a serious contender for the position.

"Justin beat him out by one snitch," Harry couldn't help but smile all the more as he thought about his best friend's achievement.

"And how many snitches did you beat them by?" Hermione had a feeling Harry wouldn't reveal his achievement without a little encouragement.

"Three," Harry had actually left one alone because he knew Justin was close enough to get it, and this final snitch was what had sealed Justin's spot as reserve. However, Harry declined to mention that fact - he had the feeling that Hermione might not approve. "But it's all worked out well in the end. Cedric's taken a chaser's position instead."

Hermione knew that Harry was hiding something. His voice had risen, he'd responded to something she hadn't really asked, to say nothing of the fact that he'd also begun to play with his cloak, something he did only when he was nervous, and he wouldn't meet her eyes. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Harry evaded the question. "What could I not tell you about a quidditch trial?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I don't know. You tell me."

"There's nothing to tell," Harry forced himself to meet Hermione's eyes. "It's not like Cedric didn't make the team."

Hermione knew for sure then that Harry had done something. "What did you do?"

Harry didn't know how Hermione knew when he'd done something wrong, and he called her on it. "How do you know I did anything?"

Hermione listed everything that had made her suspect that more had happened than Harry had told her about. Then she told him about her mother's philosophy. "Mummy is always saying that a person has to read between the lines, and that is what I just did. So what did you do?"

Harry decided that in future, if he needed to hide something, or to tell a lie, - not that he planned on so doing, of course - he would make a supreme effort not to display any signs of nerves, and he would look someone directly in the eye, as he did now while he admitted what he'd done. "I didn't go after a snitch that I'd spotted because I knew Justin would be able to catch it if I didn't."

"Harry!" Despite her suspicions that something underhand had gone on, Hermione was more than a little shocked at Harry's uncharacteristic deviousness. "That's cheating."

"Not exactly," Harry defended his decision. "I just ignored the snitch. Both Justin and Cedric went for it, but Justin got there first."

"Did you know that Diggory would make chaser?" Hermione questioned Harry.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "I wouldn't have done it otherwise. But if I hadn't left the snitch alone, Justin wouldn't have made it onto the team as reserve, and he's been trying so hard, and Cedric would have been both reserve seeker and chaser, so it didn't seem fair. And Justin's only going to get to play if I can't, so it's not as if it was for a proper team place, and I already knew I'd caught enough snitches to make seeker when I left the last snitch alone."

Hermione had to stifle a giggle at Harry's longwinded excuse, but she had to admit that he did have a point. "Okay but don't ever do it again."

"I won't," Harry promised, and he decided that a rapid change of subject was in order. "So what are you reading?"

"It's Gilderoy Lockhart's latest book," Hermione blushed. "I thought I'd get a head start."

Harry looked at Hermione in amazement. "But he's not coming until next year."

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared," Hermione, however, closed the book and placed it in her book bag. "I'd better go and drop this lot off in Gryffindor."

"I'll go and get showered then," Harry jumped up, and knocked a chair over, earning a frown from the librarian. "See you after dinner in here?"

"I'm going to get an early night," Hermione's blush, which had started to diminish, flared up again.

Harry dropped his head to hide his laughter. He had a feeling his friend was actually going to be reading about Lockhart, but probably in her room behind her bed curtains where no-else could see. "Then I probably won't see you until charms tomorrow."

"Have you done your homework?" Hermione's voice became censorious.

"I finished it before I went to the quidditch trial," Harry opened the door for Hermione, who headed down the corridor.

"If I don't see you at dinner, I'll see you tomorrow," Hermione said before she peeled off towards the stairs.

"See you," Harry hurried back towards Hufflepuff. He couldn't wait to tell Justin what he'd just caught Hermione reading.

Justin, however, wasn't surprised. Sitting on his bed with wet hair, he shook his head at Harry. "Sometimes I don't think that you pay attention to something unless it's right in front of you, Harry."

"Yes, I do," Harry protested, before he wrinkled his forehead, and questioned Justin's comment. "Anyway, what makes you say that?"

"I think that everyone in this school is reading or wants to read 'Magical Me'," Justin picked up a sock that Harry had sent flying while he was sorting out fresh clothing.

"Have you read it yet?" Harry stopped searching for the matching sock to look at Justin.

Justin handed Harry the matching sock that had also flown in his direction. "I thought about buying it, but Hannah said I could read her copy when she's finished with it."

"It's really that good?" Harry picked up his towel.

"Supposed to be," Justin responded.

"Perhaps I'll get a copy as well then," Harry decided it wouldn't hurt to be up-to-date if everyone else was doing the same thing.

Harry's copy of Magical Me arrived two days later with Hedwig. She dropped it onto the table at breakfast, and hooted expectantly at Harry, who smiled at her. "You want a piece of bacon, don't you?"

Hedwig hooted impatiently; of course she wanted a piece of bacon. Her indignation came to an end when not only Harry, but Justin and Susan also fed her bacon off their plates. Satisfied, she gave a tiny hoot at the children, before taking to the wing, and returning the way she'd come.

As soon as breakfast was over, Harry headed back to his bedroom. Flopping down onto his bed, he pressed a small indentation on the packet with his thumb, and the book enlarged, enabling Harry to begin reading. He was still reading when Justin came in to tell him that it was lunchtime. Harry sat up, and placed the book on his bedside table. He'd been spellbound by its contents, but he had some doubts. "I can't possibly see how one man could have done all of this."

"He's supposed to be a brilliant wizard, and I think this just proves it," Justin had been able to borrow Hannah's book the previous day, and like Harry, he'd read most of it already. Unlike Harry, however, he had no doubts about Lockhart's abilities. "And I think he's going to be an amazing teacher."

Despite his reserve, Harry had to agree. "I suppose. I wonder if he'll show us how to do some of the spells he used."

"I should imagine so," Justin said hopefully. "Come on, lunch is being served and I'm starving."

Harry's stomach growled at him. "So I am. I can finish this later."

After lunch, Harry and Justin joined their other friends, except for Luna, who was in the hospital wing suffering from a particularly bad bout of Muggle flu. And Harry's concerns were addressed by Hermione, who dismissed them as 'really silly', citing what their Headmaster had done in his lifetime. After finishing their homework, the group disbanded, both Harry and Justin intending to finish 'Magical Me'.

Once they'd finished reading, Harry dropped the book into his trunk. "I still think it's a little bit much for one person, no matter what Hermione thinks."

"I don't," Justin put down the book, and picked up another he had on his bedside table. "Look at this."

Harry took the book from Justin. "Break With a Banshee?"

"It's about his time spent in Ireland," Justin told Harry what Hannah had told him. "But he's written nine or ten others."

Harry opened the book, and skimmed through its contents. "It's more about what's he done. He must have spent every minute of his lifetime defeating these creatures."

"He probably has," Justin took back the book. "He's an honorary member of the Dark Force Defense League, a group that fights against dark magic and evil."

"You seem to know a lot about him," Harry teased Justin.

Justin went red. "Hannah and Susan told me all about him."

Harry got up from his bed. "I need a break from Lockhart. I'm going to fly circuits. Do you want to come?"

Justin shook his head. "I want to start reading this book. Hannah's already promised it to Susan, and I need to get through it."

Harry went to the bathroom, before returning to pick up his broomstick. "I'll see you later then."

Justin didn't respond. He'd already immersed himself in the world of Gilderoy Lockhart and his daring feats. Harry groaned under his breath. "This can't last much longer." Shaking his head, he left the room.

But Harry was wrong. The Lockhart Phenomena, as one of the teachers called it, only got worse as the first few weeks of term went by. Students could not only be seen toting 'Magical Me' around, but also other books Lockhart had written; "Gadding with Ghouls", and "Wandering with Werewolves" proving to be the most popular. And most of the teachers - except of course, Snape and Minerva - were finding that they were talking more about Lockhart than they were about the subject they were teaching, being bombarded with numerous questions from lovesick witches of all ages.

But there was one witch who didn't subscribe to the Gilderoy Lockhart fan club. Luna shook her head when Ginny tried to pass on a copy she'd borrowed of Wandering with Werewolves. "Daddy said he's talking poppycock."

Ginny thought that rather rich coming from someone in Luna's family, particularly someone who hunted creatures that didn't exist. She again tried to pass the book to Luna. "Just read this, and you'll see you're wrong."

Luna shook her head. "I trust Daddy, so I'm not going to waste my time."

Bolstered by Luna's rejection of Lockhart's feats, Harry mentioned his own doubts. "I did wonder how one person could do all that."

"Daddy wrote about him in his letter," Luna fished it out of her bag, and shoved it towards Harry. "Read it."

"It's private, Luna," Harry was reluctant to take the letter.

"Go on," Luna shoved the letter towards Harry, "I want you to read it."

Harry unwillingly took the letter, and began to read what Xenophilius had written. By the time he'd finished reading, he was frowning. "He said that he was there when a man called Emin Vartanian defeated the Wagga Wagga Werewolf, and that it wasn't Lockhart at all. But when Luna's Dad questioned Emin the next day for the Quibbler, the man denied any knowledge of it."

"That's because he didn't do it," Ginny said impatiently. "Gilderoy Lockhart did. This Emin person probably wanted to get some publicity, and he got worried when he realized he'd be interviewed."

"Daddy swears Emin defeated the Werewolf using the Hormophus charm," Luna repeated what had been in her letter.

"He was obviously wrong," Ginny waved the book around. "It was Gilderoy Lockhart who used the Hormophus charm on the werewolf. It's all in here."

"I believe what Daddy said," Luna ignored Ginny's pushing the book towards her yet again, "and I think Lockhart stole the idea from that man."

"Harry, you've read the book," Ginny turned to Harry for support. "Tell her."

Having met Luna's father, Harry would have said that he was strange, but most definitely not a liar. "Sorry, Ginny. I'm on Luna's side."

Ginny scowled. "You'll both see how wrong you are when Gilderoy Lockhart starts teaching next year." After scooping up the book, she promptly stomped off.

Luna smiled at Harry. "Thank you for believing me."

"Something didn't feel right when I was reading the book, and what your Dad said made me believe you," Harry pulled out his own copy of Wandering with Werewolves. "And it means that this book is probably a load of rubbish."

"Daddy said they all are," Luna replaced her letter in her bag. "What will you do with the book?"

"I don't know," Harry shoved the book back into his bag. "But I'm not wasting my time reading this one or any of the others."

Luna stared at Harry. "Others?"

"I actually bought all of the books," a red faced Harry admitted, as Luna stifled a giggle. "But I suppose I can always burn them."

Harry didn't burn them, but he did bury them deep in his trunk, swearing he'd never read them again. He had no idea that they'd become the reading material for his third year classes.

Harry sat down next to a green-faced Ron. "You're going to do just fine."

"I'm going to look stupid," Ron lamented. "I'm going to be crap. I should never have agreed to this."

"But you can do it," Neville protested, and reminded him about Ron's skill. "Look at how you caught that key."

"I got lucky," Ron wailed, Neville's words not quite having the same effect that Harry's had had on the Hogwarts Express. "Let me back out."

Seamus waved his fork in the air, as he too joined in with trying to persuade Ron to continue. "No-one will laugh at you. At least you're having a go."

George also tried to encourage his brother. "He's right, Ron. Look at who else is going up for this. McGraw is the size of a house, Bond is all fingers and thumbs, and..."

Fred butted in when George took a breather for air, "...and Jardin wouldn't know the brush from the handle on a broomstick."

Ron let the twins' words sink in, before responding in a still despondent voice. "This will make it all the worse for me when I mess up."

"You won't mess up, Ron," Surprisingly Hermione backed up the twins. "And if you think you're going to, just pretend that no-one else is there, or that they're all naked."

Ron had never heard of the Muggle way of trying to relax someone before. "Naked?"

"It will certainly distract you," Fred gave a guffaw, "especially if you think of someone like Snape."

Ron gagged. "I'm going to need to scrub my brains out now!"

But Hermione and Fred's combined ploy had worked, and the discussion on the Gryffindor table devolved into a plethora of derogatory remarks about who would be the most disgusting person they could think of without clothes; Snape won hands down.

And when it was time to head out to the quidditch pitch, Ron's nerves did return a little, but on spotting Snape as he went by and remembering Fred's words, he was hard pushed to hold onto his nerves, his main urge now being to laugh but knowing better not to. And once he reached the quidditch pitch, he tried his best to ignore everyone, and concentrate on what Oliver Wood, the captain of the quidditch team, was saying.

Soon Oliver had finished his short but impassioned speech, and he began to survey everyone who'd turned up, giving instructions to each of them until he reached Ron. "You're here for the Seeker's position?"

"Yeah," Ron tried to keep his voice steady.

"Would you mind also trying out for goalkeeper?" Oliver asked. "I need a reserve, and you and McClaggan are both the same size, so I want you both to try out."

When Wood walked off, Ron glanced over at the boy who was in the year above him, and tried to be polite. "Alright?"

"I will be when I make reserve goalkeeper," McClaggan's voice was full of determination, and not a little cockiness.

Feeling intimidated, Ron fell silent, taking up his broomstick when told to by Oliver, and heading out to the pitch. The three boys George had mentioned were already floating in the air, Bond and Jardin both looking as though they might fall off at any moment, and McGraw's bowing broom giving the impression that it was going to break and send its rider plummeting to the ground. Upon seeing this, Ron's confidence began to return, and it was given a further boost by Harry, who was sitting in the stands with Justin, yelling out loudly, "You can do it, Ron."

Ron gave Harry a thumbs up, and, gritting his teeth, he readied himself for the challenge ahead. By the end of the test, when Ron landed and handed over the snitches he'd caught, he discovered that he'd easily got more snitches than anyone else, and his face split into a happy grin. "I did it, I actually did it."

Neville came running over. "Ron, you were brilliant."

Oliver wouldn't have said that, all four possibilities for the seeker's position having taken over an hour to catch the nine snitches he'd released. But due to a serious lack of seeking talent, Oliver didn't have much choice, and so he held out his hand. "Ron, the seeker's position is yours. You can go and get showered now."

"So I don't need to try out for reserve goalkeeper?" Ron asked.

"No," Oliver had already put McClaggan up against some of the chasers while Ron was pursuing the snitches. "McClaggan is going to be reserve."

Ron was delighted. McClaggan was only a reserve, and he, Ron, had made the quidditch team. His brothers clapped him on the back, and made an offer Ron wasn't going to refuse just before Harry came over and congratulated Ron. "Well done."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron's happiness was evident; his smile was the brightest Harry had ever seen. "That was amazing."

Like Oliver Wood, Harry couldn't say the same. So, remembering what Hermione had said to him after his own quidditch trials, Harry met Ron's eyes, and deftly side-stepped any possible minefields by avoiding commenting on Ron's skills. "You looked as though you were enjoying yourself."

"It was fun," Ron turned as he heard his name being called. "Look, I've got to go. Fred and George are going to be holding some sort of party to celebrate the new team."

"See you later then," Harry turned to Justin while Ron and the rest of the Gryffindor team walked off. "What did you think?"

Not wanting to be horrible about Ron, Justin looked anywhere but at Harry, and told a white lie. "He did pretty well."

"You're lying, Justin," Harry grinned, and he explained how he knew. "You've gone red, you won't look at me, and you're fidgeting."

Justin absorbed this information, and he turned his previous comment into a direct question to see how Harry reacted. "So you don't think he did pretty well?"

"No, I don't, Justin," Harry answered truthfully. "I think Gryffindor is going to get slaughtered this year."

"Yeah, they are," Justin agreed, finally voicing his opinion now that Harry had been so honest. "Ron was just the best of a bad bunch."

Harry sighed. "The whole game relies on the seeker, and if Ron doesn't get better, everyone is going to beat them. We are, Ravenclaw with that Cho girl will, and so will Slytherin."

"Who's their seeker now that Higgs has left?" Justin hadn't heard yet.

"I don't know," Harry had tried to find out but his discreet inquiries had gone unanswered. "But at least we're going to have a strong team this year. You never know, we might even win the Quidditch Cup."

"I'm not banking on it," Justin didn't want to get his hopes up. "Come on, I've got some sweets and chocolate Mum sent me in my room. We can grab some, and then work on our potions essay."

Harry pulled a face about the potions essay, but the thought of chocolate helped to ease his pain, and the two boys headed back in to Hufflepuff.

As Harry had predicted, Slytherin slaughtered Gryffindor in the first match of the season. And both Harry and Justin had been surprised to find that a girl, Helena Cory, had taken over as seeker. But in truth she was almost as bad as Ron, and it had only been the sheer volume of foul plays and Cory being lucky enough to be right beside the snitch when it had appeared for the tenth time, that had led to Slytherin's win.

Harry's first outing of the season, however, went much better. Remembering last year's game, Harry changed his playing tactics. Instead of immediately going straight for the snitch to prevent Cho Chang, the pretty Asian girl whose name he hadn't known previously, from obtaining it, being a little more seasoned, this time Harry used his body to block the girl's sight of the golden snitch. Using this method, Harry was able to hold Chang at bay for almost twenty minutes, blocking several attempts she made to access the snitch, until it disappeared into the distance each time.

Harry's ploy worked to Hufflepuff's advantage, and the team, with Cedric Diggory playing in his new position, racked up over 200 points before Harry swooped in and took the snitch, using the roll technique he'd introduced Ginny to, in order to fool Chang as he'd swept beside her, reaching out with his left hand to grab the snitch. This put Hufflepuff ahead of Slytherin, something that hadn't happened for over forty years. But it was something that made Harry even less popular with Severus Snape, who promptly placed Harry in detention a few days later.

Harry's back hurt, and his fingers were bleeding by the time he'd finished scrubbing out the cauldrons that Gryffindor and Slytherin had been using earlier that day. Harry suspected that the two dirtiest cauldrons that he'd left until the end to clean had belonged to Seamus and Neville, two of the notoriously worst potion brewers ever to step foot inside Hogwarts. Finally though, he'd finished, and he swilled out the last one, and put it out to dry. "I've finished, Professor. Is there anything else?"

Severus met Harry's familiar green eyes, and they were so like Lily's that Severus' heart felt as if it had almost stopped beating. Severus had intended to make Harry scrub the floor but he suddenly found that he didn't want to be in the same room as the boy, and he snarled at him. "No, get out."

Harry fled gratefully, leaving the potions master behind.

After he'd left, Severus opened his desk drawer and fingered the diary that still resided in there. Severus had had a chance to plant the diary on Harry while Harry was cleaning, but just as they had at the start of term, thoughts of Harry's mother had stopped him from effectively ending Harry's life. And doing that would have made Severus happy. He hated the dark-haired boy who looked so much like James Potter that it was like a knife in Severus' side every time his eyes rested on Harry's wayward hair. But whenever Harry looked up, his features unmarred by glasses, his bright green eyes would pierce Severus in a totally different way. And remembering how Harry's eyes had met his just moments earlier, Severus found himself thinking about Lily's eyes again, and he half-wished he hadn't handed out a detention to Harry, thereby opening himself to the torment that came anytime he thought about the woman who'd borne the boy.

Severus thought back to the trigger that had caused him to decide to punish Potter. He'd been at the quidditch game of a few days earlier when Harry had taken the snitch against Ravenclaw. As the entire Hufflepuff team had been flying a victory lap, Severus couldn't help but notice how much like James Potter the boy actually was. Potter had always showed off after winning just like his son was doing now, and Severus had been filled with a hatred he could barely contain. And he had to fight not to pull out his wand when Harry had gotten closer to the teachers' box, the snitch held aloft in his hand. His fingers closed around the slim piece of wood, Severus had locked eyes with Harry for a fraction of a second, and it had been hard to miss how bright and filled with joy Harry's eyes had been. At that moment in time, Harry had looked more like his mother than he'd ever done before, and it had reminded Severus of how Lily had looked when she had first told him about her acceptance to Hogwarts. And Severus hated Harry all the more for reminding him of it.

30 January 1971

Severus held out hope that Lily would receive a letter on her birthday, and he hurried to their usual spot to wait for her. Less than an hour after he had arrived, Lily came dashing over, waving a piece of parchment in her hand, her green eyes shining brightly. "Sev, I got in. I got in."

Severus was almost knocked over as Lily bowled into him. "I told you that you would."

Lily released Severus from the delighted hug she'd just given him. "Mum and Dad are really pleased."

"And Tunia?" Severus didn't like Lily's older sister, and he knew too well that she felt the same way about him.

"She cried," Lily's happy face vanished. "She doesn't think that it's fair that I get to go to Hogwarts and she doesn't."

Severus was glad that Petunia had turned out to be non-magical, her eleventh birthday arriving a few months after they'd first met, and she hadn't received a letter. Severus had been so elated. He wouldn't have to put up with the older girl when he and Lily went to Hogwarts. "I wonder what house you'll get into."

"As long as it's the same as you, I don't care," Lily declared vehemently. "You're my best friend, and wherever you go, I'm going as well."

Severus experienced a warm feeling deep inside of him. Apart from his mother and Lily, he didn't care about anyone else, and Lily's words made him want to grin stupidly. "And you're mine, and always will be."

"Best friends forever," Lily took Severus' bare hand. "Can you cast a spell to warm me up?"

Severus pulled out his wand, which he'd revealed had once belonged to his Great-Great-Grandmother, and cast a warming spell. "Is that better?"

"Yes, thanks," Lily sighed heavily. "I wish I had my wand."

Severus handed over his wand. "Try mine again."

"It never works for me," Lily waved it in the air, trying a spell to light up the end of the wand, but as usual it didn't work. "Told you. I'm going to have to wait until I get my own wand."

Severus took back his wand. "You won't be able to use your wand outside of school. It has tracking and detection charms on it."

"You told me that already," Lily reminded Severus.

"But I haven't told you that I think I've found out how to remove them," Severus revealed. "So if you want, when you get your wand, I could take the charm off it." Severus wasn't exactly being honest; he knew the spell but not whether he could cast it yet. However, impressing Lily was far more important than the truth.

"Really?" Lily asked excitedly, before commonsense kicked in. "Perhaps I shouldn't. I could get into trouble."

"They don't check your wands at Hogwarts," Severus said in a grand and utterly convincing voice, although he honestly had no idea whether his statement was true or not. "So do you want me to do it?"

"I'll think about it," Lily was determined not to give into temptation, and to do something she knew was wrong.

However, two weeks later, the day after buying her wand, Lily met up with Severus, and showed him her new wand. "It's made of willow with a unicorn hair core."

"Mine's made of yew with a basilisk heartstring," Severus finally revealed, having made Lily wait to find out what his wand was made of until she had her wand.

"Your wand is really different," Lily observed. "Maybe that's why it wouldn't work for me. Do you want to try mine?"

"I'll have to remove the underage tracking spells on it first," Severus reminded her.

"Do it," Lily had thought and thought about Severus' offer, and curiosity and ambition had gotten the better of her. She wanted to be as good as Severus was with spells before she reached school, and she couldn't do that if she didn't have a wand she could use to practice.

Severus took her wand from her, and touched his own to it, "Extractum Parvulus Subsisto."

"How do you know how to do that?" Lily asked as she took back her wand.

"My Great Uncle taught me," Severus didn't tell her that he'd been taught far more than that, although like the removal spell, he hadn't tried a lot of the spells he'd already learnt.

Lily offered her wand back. "Do you want to have a go?"

"Are you sure?" Severus was itching to try someone else's wand; his uncle had always refused to let Severus experiment with his wand despite teaching him a plethora of spells.

"Go ahead," Lily encouraged Severus. "Try it out."

Severus took the offered wand, and waved it through the air, "Relashio." A few sparks shot out of the wand. "I don't think your wand really suits me."

While Lily took her wand back, Severus pulled out his own wand and repeated the spell. This time a jet of bright red and orange sparks shot out from the end of the wand, making Lily gasp in delight. "That's brilliant."

"Thanks," Severus was pleased with Lily's praise, and he slid his own wand back inside his coat sleeve, before encouraging Lily to try out her wand. "It's your turn to cast a spell."

Lily took a deep breath and, not wanting to look stupid in front of Severus by trying and failing at the spell he'd just done, Lily instead tried a simple spell that she had attempted previously with Severus' wand. "Lumos." She gave a delighted scream as the end of her wand began to glow brightly. "How do I turn it off?"

"You've heard me say the spell before," Severus reminded her. "Nox."

Lily repeated Severus' word, and the light at the end of her wand went out. "Now how do I know that the underage tracking has really gone?"

"You'll get an owl to tell you if you've broken the underage rules," Severus, however, was quite sure that the spell had worked. His suspicion was proved correct when after an hour, and the casting of as many spells as Lily could remember from her books, no owl had appeared. "You haven't received anything, so you can practice your spells as much as you want to, but I wouldn't do spells in your house. Tunia might tell your parents."

Lily decided that she'd stick to her and Severus' meeting place. "I'll just do them here then." She shivered. Snow was beginning to fall, and it was starting to coat the ground. "I wish it was summer."

"Me too," Severus' coat protected him from the worst of the weather but even he shivered, the warming spell he'd cast earlier having faded. "Lily, I'd better get home. The snow is getting heavy, and I don't want Mum to worry about me."

"Can you come here again tomorrow?" Lily asked hopefully.

Severus regretfully shook his head. "We're going to visit my Uncle for a few days, so I won't be back until the weekend."

"I'll see you next Saturday then," Lily went to leave, but on a whim she impulsively turned around and dropped a quick kiss on Severus' cheek, before grinning brightly at him. "Bye."

Severus stood in the rapidly falling snow, and touched his cheek. His face split into a grin, and still smiling, he turned and headed home.

During their meeting, neither Severus nor Lily had any idea that, from the window of her home, Petunia had been watching them with a disgruntled look. She therefore already knew what the two children had been doing. She did not, however, intend to tell her parents about Lily's spell casting, for Petunia truly believed that if she did, her parents would only laud Lily's abilities even more. "It's not fair. Why should she get the magic?"

Anger made Petunia's hands flex reflexively, and her fingers tightened around a crumpled letter that bore the Hogwarts' seal. Anger turned to resentment as she thought about what the letter said, and, faced with what she'd never have, Petunia's dislike and jealousy of all things magical solidified into pure hatred. Throwing

the letter into the bin at her side, Petunia muttered, "Freaks. They're all freaks." Giving the two children outside one last look of disgust, Petunia moved away from the window.

Present time

Severus growled angrily. "I don't want to think about her."

"Who, Severus?" Albus' voice drifted into the classroom.

"No-one," Severus closed the desk drawer. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about all the detentions you're assigning Harry," Albus sat down on the edge of the desk. "It has to stop, Severus."

"He's a useless, good for nothing, little brat," Severus didn't bother to hide his feelings about Harry.

"I'm sure you feel the same way about Neville Longbottom, but I don't see you assigning him detention every other day," Albus wasn't stupid, he knew exactly how Severus viewed most of the students. "And I'm quite certain there are plenty of other students who you also find irritating."

"I don't have time to monitor all of them," Severus made an excuse. "And Potter is easily the worst potions maker at this school."

"Minerva seems to think differently," Albus had spoken to Minerva about how Harry had performed during the summer. "And she had Harry brew every potion that he'd made for you during term time, and he brewed them perfectly, Severus."

Severus resisted the angry urge to pull his wand on Albus, but forced himself to calm down, knowing, that despite his age, Albus would overpower him. "So what do you suggest?"

"Harry will attend potions with his classmates but I will be assessing his finished potions," Albus' voice was resolute, leaving Severus in no doubt that this new arrangement was non-negotiable. "And during class time you will answer any questions he might have, and instruct him as usual but unless he does something that truly warrants a detention, you will leave Harry alone. Is this understood?"

"Yes," Severus ground out, having little choice but to acquiesce. "Is that all, Headmaster?"

"It is," Albus got to his feet, but didn't leave straightaway. His face was full of concern as he faced Severus. "Severus, don't let your hatred for someone who is long dead cloud your judgment. You're only hurting yourself in the long run."

"I'll bear that in mind," Forcing his anger which had surged up again, deep down inside of him, Severus turned away, waiting for the Headmaster to leave.

Realizing his words had had no impact, Albus sadly shook his head. "Just try, Severus, for both of your sakes."

This time Severus didn't respond to the Headmaster, and after the door had closed, Severus opened his desk drawer again. "Next time, Potter, there will be no reprieve, Lily be damned." He then grabbed the diary, shoved it inside his cloak and walked out of the classroom.

Next Chapter: Severus is thwarted in his attempts; Luna runs into trouble; Draco falls foul of George Weasley.

Chapter 20: Galloping Goit Spackle

September turned into October, and October into November. Lockhart mania died down, and the school returned to a normal rhythm. When Christmas arrived, Harry stayed at school, wanting to spend the time with Minerva, but his friends all returned home. And the New Year came and went without any major upsets, and without Severus achieving his goal.

Therefore, still not having succeeded by the time Easter arrived, Severus was beyond frustrated. Every opportunity to plant the diary on Harry had failed. Severus had therefore decided to return home for a few days during the holiday weekend - he wanted to converse with the diary, but he didn't want to risk doing so in the hallowed confines of Hogwarts. However, as Severus sat at his battered oak desk in the room that served as both a library and a study, he found himself more than a little nervous. But aware that he couldn't put off informing the diary's occupant of his failure for very much longer, Severus took a deep breath, opened the diary up, and wrote in it, "Time is running out. Easter is upon us and I have been unable to deposit the diary on Potter without suspicion."

"What has gone wrong?" The diary's occupant asked.

Severus, of course, didn't mentioned that during the course of the year, he'd had several chances to dump the diary on Harry, but initially his guilt about Lily had stopped him. Instead he cited that circumstances had changed enough to prevent him from carrying out his deed. "Dumbledore decided I was being too hard on the boy, and thus prevented me from placing him in detention where I might have had an opportunity to place the diary upon him."

"In that case, we will wait for the new school year to try again," The words came back after a short time, before they faded and more took their place. "And I expect you to come up with a way to try and place the diary on the boy at the start of the year - after what you have told me about our shared history, Potter is still my number one choice. But should you not succeed, then we should rethink our strategy about depositing the diary on the boy, and find an alternate victim. Tell me, Severus, do you have any suggestions as to who would make almost as good a sacrifice as Potter?"

Severus thought for a few minutes, "There are several suitable alternative candidates I can think of. But before I try and place the diary upon any of them next year, perhaps you could offer your opinion as to whom you would prefer."

The man and the diary's occupant then exchanged a good deal of information, before Severus closed the diary, and placed it in his safe. As instructed, it would be the start of the new school year before he took it out again.

Hermione wandered disconsolately along the corridor. She really liked George Weasley, and she'd just discovered that he was taking Alicia Spinnet into Hogsmeade for Easter Sunday. Wrapped up in her misery, she barely noticed where she was going, and before she knew what had happened, she had almost walked into Draco Malfoy and his two goons, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.

Normally Hermione would have turned away, but this time she couldn't. For up against the wall, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and her book bag at her feet, was Luna Lovegood. Hermione had the feeling that she would not have time to fetch a teacher before the Slytherins finished whatever they were intending to do, and so she instead opted for the offensive approach, "What do you think you are you doing to her?"

"Having a little fun," Draco smirked at his fellow Gryffindors. "Weren't we, boys?"

Hermione realized that her first instinct had been right, and she bravely made a demand, "Let her go."

"This has nothing to do with you, Granger," Draco drawled, turning his back on Hermione. "It's her we have the problem with, so get lost."

Hermione didn't budge. "Let her go. I bet she's done nothing to you."

"She sent me this," Draco spun around and threw a magazine at Hermione.

Hermione caught it, stopping it from hitting her in the face. After examining what he'd thrown at her, Hermione looked at Draco with

scorn. "You're picking on her because she sent you a copy of the Quibbler?"

"She also sent me a note saying that I might find the piece on galloping goit spackle of interest," Draco snarled.

Luna finally said something, "I saw the spots on his face, and they looked a lot like galloping goit spackle to me, so I thought I'd send him something to read that might help."

"Luna, I don't think there's any such thing as galloping goit spackle. Don't you mean spattergroit?" Hermione remembered Ron being asked if he had it by one of the Castle portraits, but the portrait had been referring to Ron's freckles, and not the normal teenage pimples that Draco had begun to develop.

"But there is," Luna responded in a convincing voice. "And Malfoy definitely looks as though he has it."

"I haven't got goit spackle, Loony," Draco glared at the other two Slytherins, who were stifling their snorts of laughter. "As that know-it-all has just pointed out, it doesn't exist, and if it did, I still wouldn't have it. Stupid freak!"

"She was just trying to help, Malfoy. Now if you don't let her go, I will fetch a teacher," Hermione threatened.

"If you want her, then please, take her," Malfoy offered in an uncharacteristically nice voice.

Now a little unnerved, but not wanting to be seen as antagonistic by drawing her wand, Hermione left it up her sleeve. Instead, she glared at both Greg and Vincent, and beckoned to the blonde girl, "Luna, come here."

At Hermione's angry stare, both Greg and Vincent stepped aside, and let the blonde girl move. Draco had already said that Hermione could take Luna, and so they weren't going to interfere.

Draco, however, had other plans, and the moment Hermione touched Luna's arm, he withdrew his wand, aiming it at both girls, "Densaugeo."

Despite her apprehension, Hermione hadn't really expected Draco to attack her. She therefore knew that she wasn't going to be able to draw her wand in time to defend herself. Doing the only thing she could, she swung Luna out of reach of the spell that leapt from Draco's wand, and took the brunt of it instead. At first Hermione thought that nothing had happened, and that the spell had failed, then she felt her teeth engorging.

Luna gave a gasp of horror, "Your teeth!"

"I cwm fweel wem," Hermione's words were totally distorted, and she slapped a hand to her mouth but it did little to cover her still growing dentures. "Swop it, Malfwoy, swop it."

Draco laughed nastily. "Serves you right for interfering. Next time keep your nose out of things that don't concern you, Granger," He and his friends then sauntered off.

Luna took Hermione's arm. "I don't know how to stop it. We'd better go and see Madam Pomfrey."

Hermione's front teeth had almost reached her feet when she stepped through the door of the hospital wing, and she was beginning to panic. Luna called out, "Madam Pomfrey?"

Pomona came bustling out, and took one look at Hermione, before shaking her head. "Student pranks will be the death of me." She then aimed her wand at Hermione, "Arresto Auctus."

Hermione's teeth immediately stopped growing but they still remained almost as tall as she was. She looked hopelessly at Madam Pomfrey, who hadn't quite finished, and she passed Hermione a mirror. "When they reach their normal size, hold up your hand." She then recited the necessary spell, "Densredactus."

Hermione watched in the mirror as her teeth began to shrink. But just before they reached their normal proportions, she was hit with a great idea, and she waited until the very last moment to hold up her hand. When she did, Madam Pomfrey cancelled the spell. "Do they look the right size now?"

"They look just perfect," Hermione didn't want to lie to the nurse but she didn't want her original oversized teeth back either.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me who did this to you?" Poppy asked.

Hermione didn't want Draco going after Luna again, and she therefore shook her head. "Not really."

"Off you go then," Poppy dismissed her.

Luna followed Hermione out of the wing. "Thanks for sticking up for me."

"Luna, you should try and avoid Malfoy and the other Slytherins," Hermione warned, marching towards the library. "I know you mean well but you've seen how that turned out."

"But I really thought he had..." Luna's recitation was cut off by an exasperated Hermione.

"Malfoy was right about one thing. Gackle spoit, or whatever you called it, doesn't exist, Luna," Hermione snapped, her mouth still a little sore from where the oversized teeth had rubbed against it. "You need to take your head out of the clouds, and join the rest of us in the real world."

Luna's face fell immediately, and tears began to form. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

The young girl's distress meant that Hermione was hit with a healthy dose of guilt. "I'm sorry I shouted at you but Malfoy is a nasty piece of work. In future, I suggest you stick to helping your friends in Ravenclaw, instead of trying to help people like him."

"I don't have any friends," Luna blurted out, the tears beginning to spill down her cheeks, "not in Ravenclaw, anyway."

Even though she knew she wasn't exactly popular in her own house, Hermione was at least friends with Ron and Neville, as well as the twins. "You must have one friend in Ravenclaw."

Luna shook her head. "I don't. The girls in my dorm call me "Loony" - not to my face like Malfoy did - but I've heard them. I've also heard

them say that they don't want to sleep in the same room as me, in case being weird is catching."

Hermione had gone through something similar at junior school. However, she at least, had had the sanctuary of being able to go home at the end of the day. Hermione was curious, however, as to what had caused Luna's roommates to reject her. "Were they horrible when you first moved into the dormitory?"

"No," Luna slumped into the niche at the back of the stacks in the library that Hermione had steered her to. "And I've tried talking to them, but they make excuses or just walk off."

"What do you talk to them about?" Hermione asked, starting to suspect that the topic of conversation might be the cause of Luna's problems.

Luna began a recitation on the various creatures she believed in, the Quibbler, Ginny, and Harry. "Actually the only time they bother to listen to me is when I talk about Ginny and Harry."

Hermione was hardly surprised that the girls avoided Luna if she was talking about the strange creatures she normally did. "Luna, most people like to talk about normal things, such as friends, schoolwork, or even the weather. Perhaps you should try to talk about these sorts of things, and not goit spackle or fizziwigs."

"I don't understand," Luna was completely confused. "I thought that goit spackle and fizziwigs were normal things. Lots of people have goit spackle, and if you listen, you can hear fizziwigs all the time."

Hermione had decided not to ask what fizziwigs were when Luna had listed them a few moments earlier, and she stuck to that decision now. "Luna, most people have never heard of goit spackle, and probably don't want to talk about it," Hermione herself certainly didn't. "You should talk about things that other people can understand, such as how much you don't like something, food, or what's happening in school, and lay off the talk about creatures no-one else has never heard of."

"But I like to talk about them," Luna defended herself. "And Daddy said that I should talk about the things I like."

Hermione took Luna's hand, seeing that the girl was getting even more upset. "Luna, I know you love to talk about these things, but it's just making other people, like Malfoy and the girls in your bedroom, see you differently."

"Loony, you mean?" Luna's voice was a little bitter, and she stifled a snuffle.

"I'm sorry but yes," Hermione said with regret. "Luna, if you want friends in Ravenclaw, then you're going to have to change what you talk about."

Luna met Hermione's eyes. "Would you change if it was you?"

Hermione hesitated, and considered lying, but her parents had brought her up to be a generally truthful girl, and she therefore answered honestly. "No, but that's me."

"Then I'm not going to either," Luna spoke in a determined voice.

"Then will you at least stop sending things to people like Malfoy?" Hermione pleaded. "I may not be around to save you next time, and I don't want you to get hurt."

Luna really did only consider Harry and Ginny to be her friends but Hermione's words were beginning to make her wonder if she had one more friend she could count on. "You really care what happens to me, don't you?"

Hermione hadn't thought about it before, but seeing the hopeful look on the younger girl's face, she nodded. "Of course I do."

Luna's hopeful look didn't fade with her next question, "So does this mean that you're my friend?"

Again, Hermione had never thought about it, but she couldn't hurt the girl's feelings, and say that. Rather than lying, she didn't give a straight answer. "Friends look after friends, don't they?"

It turned out that it was the right to say, for Luna beamed, and told Hermione, "This means that I've got three friends now: You, Harry, and Ginny. And because you're my friend, I can talk about what I like with you, can't I?"

"That's what friends are for," Hermione gave up as far as "normal" was concerned, but she was still determined to help Luna connect with her roommates. "Luna, I'm not going to ask you to change for me but you still might want to get some practice in talking about some..." Hermione searched for a word to sum up "normal" but failing to do so, came up with something else instead, "different things with me. It will help you get along better with the girls in Ravenclaw."

Luna was grateful for any help that Hermione might be able to offer. "What do you want to talk about?"

"How about our families?" Hermione suggested.

Luna was always happy to talk about her parents, and the two girls talked quietly in the niche for a little while until Luna regretfully stood up. "I have some charms homework I need to finish but I enjoyed our talk."

Hermione stood up as well. "So did I, Luna," She placed a hand on the girl's arm, and tried to make her point about "normal" again. "And I know you don't want to change what you talk about but the way you've just talked to me is how you should be talking to the girls in your dorm."

"That's "normal" things?" Luna checked.

"Yes," Hermione was encouraged that Luna had finally caught on. "And you can always ask me if you're not sure."

"Okay, I will," Luna grabbed her book bag, and checked the time. "And I'd like to talk normally some more but I really need to do my homework."

"Do you need help?" Hermione asked, feeling a little buoyed that she'd finally gotten through to the girl.

Luna, however, proved that she still hadn't quite grasped the concept of "normal" with her next comment, "No, thank you. My head isn't full of Wrackspurts right now, so my brain is working okay."

It occurred then to Hermione that she was never going to get Luna to be like everyone else, and that perhaps she should just give it up. With Luna following her to a table, Hermione sat down, "I have my own charms homework to do, so we can work together."

"I'd like that," Luna opened up her bag, and took out her homework, before happily settling down to get on with the problems she had been assigned.

The girls had barely started though, when they were interrupted. When a shadow fell over the table, Hermione looked up, and she smiled when she saw who it was. "George, what are you doing here? I thought you were going into Hogsmeade."

"I was going to but I changed my mind," George hefted his book bag onto the seat beside him. "I've been looking for you. I have an arithmancy problem I thought you might like to take a look at, if I'm not interrupting."

Hermione immediately ditched the homework she'd begun. "You're not." When George looked at her in surprise, she suddenly realized that George had meant interrupting because of Luna, and not because of her charms homework, and she quickly clarified what she'd meant. "Luna and I were doing some charms homework, but mine can wait."

"I've got some charms homework too," George pulled that out. "So I think we should all get that done, and then we can all look at the arithmancy problem together."

Realizing that George had included her in his comment, Luna smiled a little shyly at the older boy, before settling back down to her work. She never usually felt so comfortable, but sitting across from George and Hermione, she experienced a moment of belonging, something that only ever happened when she was with her Dad or Harry. After a few minutes, she proffered up some information. "I want to study arithmancy when I'm a third year. Mum used it a lot when she was trying new spells."

George's ears pricked up at the mention of new spells. "Your Mum was a spell developer?"

Luna was delighted that George seemed interested. "Yes, she invented the Fata Advertus spell, which attracts fairies."

George had never heard of such a spell before, but he decided that he might have a use for it. "Do you know how to cast the spell?"

"Yes, I can show you, if you want me to," Luna began to tug out her wand from her hair. "And I know more than that one, if you want to see those as well."

"Not right now," George didn't think that Irma Pince would be too happy if fairies began to appear in the library. "But perhaps we can talk about it after we've finished doing our homework."

"Does this mean that you're my friend now?" Luna hoped so, for it would mean that she would have four friends, instead of three, which would be two more than she'd started the day with.

George would have let her call him anything she liked as long as she shared the spells she was privy to. "You're my friend."

"Goodie," Luna re-secured her wand, and buried her head back in her charms book.

George too dipped his head down, and began his own homework but part of his brain was already figuring out for what he could use the newly discovered spell.

After finishing their respective homework, and discussing the arithmancy question - Luna struggling a little to understand it, but Hermione easily deducing the answer - the trio went outside. Here Luna showed George the fairy spell, and George gave her a spontaneous hug for showing him. Wanting to drop off her book bag before dinner, Luna, beaming from ear to ear, skipped off back towards Ravenclaw.

A little jealous of the attention that George had shown Luna, Hermione took him to task while they walked back to Gryffindor, "You shouldn't encourage her to do that, George."

"It's just a harmless spell, Hermione," George answered, as he took from Hermione one of the large books that she was toting.

Hermione's jealousy over Luna disappeared at the gallant gesture, but Hermione still felt that she had to explain to George about Luna. "George, up until today Luna had only two real friends, your sister and Harry."

George quickly cottoned onto what Hermione was hinting at. "So you're saying that I shouldn't be friends with her?"

"No!" Hermione didn't want George withdrawing his friendship from Luna. "But she's having a terrible time in Ravenclaw, and really, ever since her Mum died during that experiment, Luna has only had her Dad to rely on."

"I thought Luna's Mum died in an explosion," George could still remember his Mum telling them about what had happened, but to be truthful he hadn't really been listening that closely.

"She did," Hermione confirmed. "Luna said it happened when her Mum was trying to invent a new spell that involved making some sort of new potion, and the two didn't go well together."

"Luna's Mum made potions as well as inventing spells?" George excitedly asked, entirely missing the point Hermione was trying to make.

"George, you should forget about the spells and potions!" Hermione glared at him. "Luna's already has to put up with enough without you pretending to be her friend just to get some stupid spell off her."

"I'm not pretending. I like her," George answered honestly. "She might be a little weird but I don't care, so I was telling the truth when I told her that she was my friend."

"I'm sorry for accusing you of not being her friend," Hermione immediately apologized. "But I don't want Luna trying to impress you and maybe hurting herself for the sake of a stupid spell."

"Don't worry," George took a second book that Hermione was struggling with, "I won't do anything that will get her hurt."

Hermione had to settle for George's reassurance. "Thank you, and thanks for carrying those books."

"I wish Pince would let us shrink them. It would make carting them around a lot easier," George shifted them to his other arm.

"You can't shrink old library books, they might disintegrate," Hermione said in a horrified voice before she gave George an impish smile. "And who needs to shrink things when I have someone like you to carry them for me?"

George was about to respond when he realized something. Hermione looked different but he couldn't think why. Hermione stopped before George could say anything. "We're here."

Any opportunity was then lost for George, Hermione taking the books from him and thanking him again, before heading off to the girls' wing of Gryffindor.

George was sat on his bed, lost in thought, when he became aware that someone was calling him. "What?"

"Why didn't you really come into Hogsmeade with us?" Fred asked now that he'd gotten his brother's attention. "It was the last chance before the end of the term to stock up on stuff."

"I had homework to do," George nodded towards the pile of parchment that sat on his side table. "And I knew you'd get me what I wanted."

"I did," Fred confirmed George's suspicion, before going on. "But Alicia was really disappointed when you decided not to go; she really likes you, George."

George shrugged. "I like her but not like that."

"Do you still like Hermione Granger?" Fred was aware that George had had a bit of a thing for the younger Gryffindor.

"I think so," George answered his brother honestly.

"Why don't you just ask her out then?" Fred suggested.

George thought about Fred's suggestion before answering, "I want to but something keeps stopping me."

Fred began to think of reasons why George hadn't yet done so. "Is it because she's younger?"

George disparaged the guess. "No, and I'm only just over a year older than Hermione."

"Is it because she's not very attractive, and you're worried about what everyone will say?" Fred could see from his brother's darkening face that this particular guess hadn't gone down well.

"NO!" George snapped. "I don't care what someone looks like. It's like Mum always says, it's what inside that counts."

"If you say so," Fred was shallower than his twin, and he preferred looks over substance. He scratched his head, trying to think of something else. "Is it because she's cleverer than you?"

"She's not cleverer in everything," George had to admit, however, that Hermione could easily have taken all the third year classes with him, and probably passed with flying colors.

Fred continued to pester George. "Are you worried about kissing her?"

"A little," George owned up.

"Is it because of her teeth?" Fred harked back to Hermione's looks.

"What?" George stared at Fred as if he'd gone mad. "Her teeth... of course, her teeth!"

"I knew I'd get there in the end," Fred announced in a smug voice.

George hit him with his pillow. "Shut up you idiot! I'm not worried about kissing Hermione because of her teeth."

"Then... I don't get it," Fred was now completely confused.

"I knew something was different with her this afternoon," George began, only to be interrupted by Fred.

"Ha ha!" Fred had a knowing look on his face. "That's why you didn't want to go to Hogsmeade. You spent the entire afternoon studying

with her, didn't you?" Fred's tone implied that George was doing slightly more than studying.

"I spent the entire afternoon with both her and Luna Lovegood, and we were actually studying; something I'm sure you don't know much about." At this point Fred stuck out his tongue at his twin, which George ignored. "But that's not the point I'm making," George now had a smile of someone who'd finally managed to figure out a complicated puzzle. "Hermione looked different but I couldn't figure out what it was until you mentioned her looks."

Fred was still none the wiser. "So?"

George filled him in on his convoluted line of thought. "She looked different because her teeth are smaller."

Fred snorted. "You must really like her if you think she's got small teeth. There are rabbits with smaller teeth than her."

George got to his feet. "Two sickles you're wrong."

"Done," Fred held out his hand.

George shook it. "You'll see tomorrow."

"Sure I will," Fred was convinced that George was viewing Hermione through rose-colored glasses. "And I'll be laughing all the way to the bank."

"Tomorrow, Fred," George picked up his shower kit. "Just make sure you have my two sickles ready."

The next morning Hermione was sitting at breakfast when she became aware that she was being stared at. "Ron, why is Fred staring at me?"

Ron glanced over to where his brothers were sitting. "How do you know it's Fred?"

"He's wearing a tie, George rarely does," Hermione remarked. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"I dunno," Ron glanced at a craning Fred again. "Perhaps he fancies you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hermione turned back around to look once more but Fred had stopped staring.

"So?" George asked his brother as he sat back down.

"You're right," Fred was flabbergasted. "Her teeth are normal sized."

George promptly held out his hand. "Pay up!"

Fred begrudgingly handed over the two sickles. "How do you suppose she did it?"

"Spell, I suppose," George guessed. "I really don't know but I'm sure I'll eventually find out."

He didn't have to wait long. Heading along the corridor to attend arithmancy, he overheard Draco crowing about enlarging Hermione's teeth for defending Luna. George's hand went to his wand, but he hesitated, and smiled to himself. "Revenge is a dish best served cold, stone cold."

Draco Malfoy sauntered happily along the corridor. Despite Harry's and the Hufflepuff quidditch team's valiant efforts, Slytherin had won both the quidditch and house cups again, although the quidditch cup had been a close call, with only twenty points separating Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Draco turned to say something to Greg, only to realize that his friends weren't at his side, and Draco called out behind him, "Come along, Greg. I thought you'd be more enthusiastic about getting some breakfast."

Draco's answer was twin screams, and he turned around in annoyance. "What the hell?"

"I'm a girl," Greg was almost crying.

"You're in girls' clothing," Draco corrected. "You're not a girl."

Vincent was in the same predicament. Both boys were sporting skirts, Mary Janes, and oversized handbags. "Who did this to us?"

Draco looked up and down the corridor but could see no-one. "I don't know. Just go back and change. I'll see you in the Great Hall."

"Err, Draco, you might want to get changed as well," Greg suggested.

Draco dashed into the boys' bathroom that they'd just passed, and looked in the mirror. He was horrified to see his hair had been separated into two ponytails, each one held up by a bright yellow ribbon, and he was also wearing a skirt. "I'm going to kill whoever did this." He promptly ripped out the ribbons, only for two more to take their place.

"Let's get back to the dorm," Vincent suggested. "Before anyone sees us."

However before they reached the dormitory, a plethora of fairies suddenly appeared and began floating around their heads. Draco kept trying to swat them and hit them with spells but they were too quick for him. He therefore began running to try and escape them. The fairies, however, followed.

"If I find out who did this..." Draco grumbled as he ran until he reached the safe confines of Slytherin. His only consolation was the relief that no-one had passed him and the other two boys on their way back. But his relief was short-lived when Draco realized that because it was rather early in the morning, most of the Slytherins were still just getting up, or about to leave for breakfast, meaning that there were more students than usual in the common room. Silence fell when the occupants saw the state of the three boys. However, the silence quickly turned to laughter.

Embarrassed, Draco fled to his dormitory to find their roommate was just getting back from taking a shower.

Blaise's mouth fell open at the sight of the three boys in girls' clothing. "Is there something you're not telling us, Draco?"

"Fuck you," Draco snarled. "Did you do this?"

"Of course I didn't," Blaise denied having anything to do with the prank, although he wished he had. He didn't like any of the boys he

had to share a bedroom with. "If I had, I've have gone the whole hog though, and turned you into a proper girl."

"Hey, Malfoy," one of the older students called out, after poking her head around the door, "do you want to lend me your skirt and fairies?"

Draco slammed shut the door to the dormitory, narrowly missing hitting the girl's departing head. "We need to get these clothes off, and get rid of these stupid fairies."

"There's a slight problem," Vincent was tugging desperately at the skirt zipper. "It won't come undone."

Draco tried his own skirt, to discover exactly the same. "I am really going to kill whoever did this."

Blaise sat on the edge of his bed chortling. "It kind of suits you."

Flipping Blaise off, Draco tried using a severing spell. When that failed, he hunted through every single desk in the room until he found a pair of scissors in Gregory's desk. Finally managing to cut through the skirt, the hated garment fell to the floor. Draco also cut through the thin strap holding the Mary Janes on his feet. However, no matter how hard he tried, his hair remained in bunches, and he couldn't banish the fairies, which seemed to be centered solely on him. "I can't go out looking like this."

Vincent and Greg were both now redressed in trousers and boots, having cut off their skirts and shoes. Having short hair, they'd escaped the ribbons, and for some unknown reason the fairies were ignoring them, so they both now looked normal. "We're off to breakfast."

"Is food all you can think about?" Draco screamed at his friends. "What about me?"

"I'm starving, Draco," Greg was loyal to Draco but his loyalty to his stomach came first. "We'll see you later."

"I'm with you two," Blaise had no wish to stay in a room with the girlified Draco, and, still grinning, he followed the two bigger boys out.

Draco headed into the bathroom, trying every spell he knew to lift the hex that someone had put on him. It was all to no avail. After twenty minutes his hair was still tied up. But thankfully the fairies had gotten fed up with flying around his head, and they'd all vanished.

"So who have you pissed off this time, Draco?" Severus Snape's voice interrupted Draco's attempts.

"No-one, Uncle Severus," Draco really couldn't think of anyone, and it had been almost three months since he'd attacked Luna and Hermione, so it never occurred to him that this might have something to do with them.

"You're sure?" Severus withdrew his wand.

"Absolutely," Draco's voice rang with truth.

"Very well," Severus aimed his wand at Draco. "Retrogradus Exemplus Capillus."

Draco reached up and found that the bunches had vanished. "Thank you, Uncle Severus."

"You haven't looked in the mirror yet," Severus warned.

Draco did so, and gave a horrified scream. "My hair! Its turned red like those Weasels."

"I had to make it revert to its original condition," Severus didn't bother to hide his amusement at Draco's dismay. His godson sometimes irritated him beyond belief, and it was only the fact that he was Lucius' son that stopped Severus from handing out any serious punishment to the boy.

"But my hair's supposed blonde," Draco ran his fingers through his hair. "Not red."

"Your parents put a spell on it when you were a baby to turn it that color," Severus revealed. "As your godfather, I'm one of the few people who can alter it."

"So you can reapply the spell?" Draco looked hopefully at Severus.

"I'm afraid not," Severus could have but he decided to let Draco suffer for getting caught out in the first place, and he turned towards the door. "But your parents can return it to its usual condition when you return home."

"I can't be seen like this!" Draco's voice rose in a screech.

"Then I suggest you wear a hat to breakfast and on the Express," Severus was enjoying seeing the stuck-up boy panic.

"Please, Uncle Severus," Draco begged. "Please do something to help me."

Aware that Lucius would probably have something to say if he didn't help Draco out, Severus aimed his wand at Draco's head and cast the correct spell. "It won't be effective straightaway, and your hair therefore might take a few hours to revert back to blonde." Severus stepped through the doorway. "Have a nice summer, Draco."

Draco was left fuming. He was hungry but there was no way he was ever going to leave Slytherin looking like this. Draco therefore had to stay in his dormitory, and he subsequently lost his chance to crow to Harry and his friends about Slytherin's wins as he'd planned.

Luckily for Draco, his hair had once again reverted to its platinum blonde color by the time he was due to leave. However, once on board the Hogwarts Express, he found that students from other houses kept walking by his carriage, trying to catch a glimpse of him. Draco immediately pulled down the blinds, complaining loudly about anyone he didn't like in an effort to hide his embarrassment. He certainly had no idea how news of what had happened to him had gotten out; Slytherin's unspoken code of solidarity should have prevented it. But he'd bargained without George Weasley.

Hermione slid open the door to George's carriage. "Can I speak to you?"

"We'll go and see Angelina," Fred stood up and pulled Lee out with him, but not before flashing a salacious grin at George, and winking at Hermione. "We know where we're not wanted."

"But you don't..." Hermione's protest that they could stay died on her lips when both boys hurried off.

George closed the carriage door. "What is it?"

"Did you pull the prank on Malfoy that everyone is saying happened?" Hermione got straight to the reason she was there.

"I might have done," George was smirking as he said it.

This, of course, gave him away. "I told Neville it was you but he said that there was no way you could have done something that advanced. But when I heard about the fairies, I guessed it had to be you. So was it?"

"Is that why you came here? To find out about the prank?" George enquired.

Hermione went red, and dropped her head. "Yes."

"What's wrong?" George had never seen Hermione look so uncomfortable before.

"I had a bet with Neville that it was you," Hermione admitted.

"I thought you said that betting was stupid and pointless," George reminded Hermione of a previous comment she had made when she'd caught him and Fred making a bet over whose chocolate frog could jump highest.

"It is but Neville more or less said that I had no idea what I was talking about," Hermione hated her word being questioned, "and I got mad at him and bet him three sickles that it was you."

"Then tell him he owes you three sickles," George confirmed Hermione's guess.

Hermione's curiosity now overrode her embarrassment. "So, how did you do it?"

"Grab a seat." George nodded towards the seat opposite him before telling her some of the spells he'd used. "You know that I used

Luna's fairy spell but I also used a sticking hex, a hair coloring spell, a repeating spell, and an attraction spell."

Hermione was reluctantly impressed. "That really is advanced magic to combine all of those.

"I had help," George confessed he hadn't done it alone.

"Fred?" Hermione guessed.

George shook his head. "Charlie."

Hermione had heard a great deal about Charlie from Harry, and she was surprised. "I thought Charlie was above this sort of thing."

"He's known Luna since she was a baby," George told her, "and it was in her defense that he agreed to go along with the trick."

Hermione was surprised. "Are you telling me that you did this because of what Malfoy did at Easter?"

George nodded. "Yes."

"But that was ages ago," Hermione couldn't understand why George had waited so long to take action. "Why wait until now to get back at him?"

"I'm very patient," George announced, "and by leaving it this long, there would be no comeback on you and Luna."

Hermione was rather touched that George had defended her. "That was really kind of you to do that for me."

"I don't like it when people mess with my friends," George's face had turned slightly pink at the compliment, "and you and Luna are both my friends."

Hermione deflated a little at George's words, believing that he'd never see her as anything but a friend. "Thanks for sticking up for us."

"That's okay," George hadn't missed Hermione's smile drooping. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Hermione got to her feet. "I'd better get back to the others."

"I'll see you after the holidays, I suppose," George wanted to say more, but his nerve failed him.

"I suppose," Hermione's smile disappeared totally.

And it was Hermione's miserable look that finally gave George the courage he needed. Just as Hermione opened the door to leave, George got to his feet and called out, "Wait!"

Hermione turned around. "What is it?"

George went bright red before he'd even started speaking, "I was wondering, what are you doing this summer?"

Hermione let go of the door handle, and began to recite what she was how she was going to be spending her summer. "I'm going to Rome with my parents for two weeks when I get home, then I'm spending a week with my grandmother, and Luna is coming to stay with me for a week at the end of the holidays."

George thought quickly about his own plans. "Would you like to come and stay with me before you have Luna to stay?"

It was now Hermione's turn to blush. "I'd like that, but I'd have to check with my parents first."

"I should check with Mum as well but I'm sure she won't mind," George knew that his mother would be beside her with delight but he didn't want to put Hermione off.

A much happier Hermione slid open the door. "I'll write and let you know what my parents say."

"Hopefully I'll see you soon," George then couldn't decide whether to step forward and kiss Hermione, or to just simply let her leave. His nerves having returned, he decided on the latter option, and Hermione stepped out of the carriage.

Hermione gave George a parting smile, "I hope so." Then she headed off down the corridor, with butterflies dancing in her stomach, and a contented look on her face.

Next Chapter: Harry return to his relatives doesn't go well.

Chapter 21: A Blob on the Landscape

Petunia Evans opened the front door to her home, her top lip curling up slightly at the sight of her nephew and his guardian. She didn't bother with pleasantries. "You'll be collecting him in two weeks?"

"I will be here at 8am sharp," Minerva had no intention of letting Harry stay with his odious relatives a moment longer than he needed.

Harry had already said his goodbyes, not wanting to do so in front of his Aunt, or worse, his cousin. "I'll see you then."

"You will, Harry," Minerva promised, and she then turned and left.

Harry hovered nervously on the doorstep. "May I come in?"

"If you must," Petunia stepped aside. "Your room is the one at the top of the stairs. You're expected to keep it clean. You will also start each day by cooking breakfast, and cleaning the kitchen. After that I don't want to see you until dinner. After dinner you will clear up the dishes."

Harry had been told by Albus that Petunia wasn't to treat him like a servant, but compared to the amount of work she used to inflict on him, what Petunia was now asking for now was minor in comparison, so Harry didn't bring that subject up. He did, however, mention that he was supposed to be fed regular meals. "What about my lunch?"

"I'll provide you with lunch at breakfast time," Petunia was intending to give Harry a can of cold soup and a spoon. As far as she was concerned, it would mean that she was feeding him. "Is that all you have?"

Harry lifted up the leather weekender case that Minerva had enlarged slightly. He'd been too afraid to take any books or anything else school related with him in case Dudley messed with them. "Yes, Aunt Petunia. It's my clothes."

"There's a wardrobe in your room you can put them in," Petunia informed him. "You will be responsible for your own laundry, and I expect you to clean the bathroom after you've used it. You can

brush your teeth in the morning and at night, and you may shower only once Dudley has finished."

Harry knew that meant he would end up with a dirty shower and freezing cold water. "Yes, Aunt Petunia."

"You may come down at noon to collect your lunch today," Petunia pointed at the stairs. "Get up there."

Harry supposed it could have been worse. Once he'd done the dishes at breakfast, two weeks of having nothing to do but stare at the ceiling until dinner wouldn't be that bad. Harry opened the door to his appointed room to find that it contained all of Dudley's broken toys and old books. The old battered mattress that had been there the previous year had vanished, and had been replaced with an old battered bunk bed instead, but it was better than before; Harry at least had a duvet and a pillow this time. The duvet cover was a slightly threadbare Spurs one, telling Harry that it was at least six years old, Spurs being Dudley's favorite team at that time. His cousin had long since moved on to different interests since then.

Harry opened the wardrobe to find two hangers for his clothes. He decided to hang up his jacket, and to keep the rest of his clothing in his suitcase, which he placed at the bottom of the wardrobe. Closing the door, he began to look through the selection of books that littered the far side of the room. Picking several of them out, Harry placed them to one side, making sure that it wasn't obvious that he'd done this. He was aware that if his Aunt believed he was enjoying himself even just a little bit, the books would be removed from the bedroom. Harry then picked up one of the books, lay back on the somewhat lumpy bed, and began to read.

Everything was going well, at least from Harry's point of view, until Marge, Vernon's sister came to visit on Harry's last day. Harry hated her. She and her dogs had made his life an absolute misery when he'd been growing up, and he was glad that he was banished upstairs.

Harry though, had to come down for dinner, and he reluctantly took his seat next to Dudley, who'd piled his plate high with pork chops, roast potatoes, and peas. Harry waited as he was expected to, before helping himself to what was left: the smallest pork chop he'd

ever seen, a few potatoes, and lots of carrots, something that thankfully Dudley didn't like.

Marge said nothing during dinner but instead watched Harry with her beady eyes. After dinner was finished, Marge accepted a large glass of port from Vernon, and then began on her favorite thread of conversation. "So I see you took the boy back."

Harry ignored the woman, and continued to collect the plates, hiding a look of disgust when Marge allowed Ripper, Harry's least favorite of Marge's dogs, to lick her plate clean before passing it to him.

Petunia gave Harry a somewhat disgruntled look. "His school closes for a couple of weeks every year, and we had to take him in."

"Suppose it's the charitable thing to do," Turning his back on the dining room, Harry headed into the kitchen, and began to rinse off the plates, but Marge's booming voice still followed him. "Do they make you clean up at this school of yours?"

Harry went to say no, but changed his mind at the last moment. "Oh yes, they treat us like servants."

"It's good for him," Marge nodded, her triple chins wobbling. "Never hurt us to do dishes at school. The Nuns believed in hard work and cleanliness." She smiled ingratiatingly at Petunia. "That's why I like staying with you and Vernon. You both have the same ethics," and she then glared at the kitchen, "unlike the boy."

"I've tried my best," Petunia simpered, "but he's too much like his parents."

Harry's grip tightened on a plate, but he gritted his teeth and started to load the dishwasher. Marge's response drifted in to him. "I can't recall. What do you say his parents did for a living?"

"Lily didn't work; she stayed at home with Harry," Petunia didn't exactly say anything bad about her sister but she had plenty to say about James Potter. "But her husband, well he was a good for nothing layabout who didn't do a decent day's work in his life."

Harry's grip on the gravy jug tightened hard enough to break it, and he dropped the broken pieces into the sink, ignoring the blood that

was now dripping down his hand. "My Dad was not a layabout! He was an Auror!"

"An Aura?" Marge questioned Harry's comment. "What's that? Some sort of hippie?" And she laughed contemptuously. "Now I can see where he gets his bad manners from - his lazy, drug-addled father!"

Hogwarts had had what some might have considered a good influence on Harry, and after facing off against You-Know-Who, he wasn't going to let Marge simply denigrate his father, and say nothing. His face bright red with anger, Harry stormed into the dining room, and yelled at the overweight woman who was smirking. "My Dad was a policeman. That's what an Auror is, it's a magical policeman!"

"Now see here, boy" Petunia grabbed Harry by the shoulder, and span him around to face her. "You can't..."

Petunia would have torn a strip off Harry about both Marge and the fact that Harry was dripping blood on her carpet, but her words came to an end when she heard Vernon gasp out, "What have you done?"

Petunia looked over at Marge, and then back at Harry, who too turned to look back at Marge. "You've really done it this time, boy."

Harry was rather horrified at what was happening to Marge, but he was also secretly glad. "She deserved it. She shouldn't have said those horrible things about Dad, and neither should you."

Petunia raised her hand and slapped Harry hard across the face. Twin yells of pain were heard from both Vernon and Dudley, Vernon staggering backwards under a seemingly hefty blow. Too late, Petunia remembered Dumbledore's warning about the consequences of striking Harry.

There and then she decided that she'd had enough of Harry and his magic, and she pointed at the door. "Get your things and get out of my house. And when you find one of those freaks, tell them that they'd better fix whatever you've done to Marge."

Clutching his cheek, Harry dashed out of the dining room, and into the hallway. Once upstairs, Harry went in the bathroom, washed off

the blood from his cut, took out a band-aid and applied to his hand; he wasn't going to ruin his clothing for the sake of a few extra minutes in the hellish house. After then stomping his way to his bedroom, he flung open the wardrobe, snatched up his suitcase from the floor, and grabbed his jacket from the hanger. Then he banged his way downstairs, uncaring about how much noise he was making, opened the front door and let himself out, before disappearing into the night.

Minerva was beyond furious with Petunia. "What did you do to him?"

"What about what he did to Marge?" Petunia pointed to the large blob that was sitting on the floor. Only two eyes and a few holes gave any hint that it was living at all.

"For Harry to perform accidental magic of that magnitude, he would have had to have been very upset or angry," Minerva ground out. "So I'm going to repeat my question. What did you do to him?"

The blob made a few noises but with no real voice box, it couldn't share its side of the story. Dudley, who had been sitting watching television throughout the whole debacle, answered Minerva's question instead. "Harry got mad, and Aunt Marge changed into that." Dudley had thought the whole thing rather hilarious; he only put up with Marge's fussing because of the cash she liberally plied upon him, and he didn't really care about what Harry had done to her.

Minerva focused her attention on Dudley, deciding to use the carrot rather than the stick, and she pulled out a chocolate frog from her pocket. "Can you tell me why Harry got mad?"

Dudley's eyes lit up at the sight of the sweet confectionary, and he immediately began to tell Minerva what had happened, ignoring his mother's scowling face, and warning not to say anything. Once Dudley had finished, Minerva passed the chocolate to the overweight boy, Petunia screeching at him. "Don't eat that. It could be poisonous."

She was too late, and Dudley ripped open the box and pulled out the frog, which attempted to jump away. Dudley gave a scream and let go of it, the frog dropping to the floor. Petunia immediately ground it

into the floor with her shoe, for once uncaring of her carpet. "How dare you feed my son that freaky food!"

"How dare you be so rude about Harry's parents!" Minerva countered, anger starting to get the better of her. "James and Lily were decent people. Not that you ever took the time to find out once you realized that you couldn't join your sister at Hogwarts."

Petunia's cheeks colored when she realized that Minerva had to be aware that she'd written to Albus begging to be allowed to attend Hogwarts with Lily. When he'd refused, it had broken her heart, and cemented a dislike of magic into pure hatred. "Lily made her choice when she decided she preferred to spend time with that freak rather than me."

"Perhaps if you'd tried to learn more about magic, you might have gotten along a little better," Severus drawled, having left Minerva to do the talking up until then.

Minerva took the reins back up, knowing that Severus would never say what she was about to. "But you didn't. Instead you took your jealousy out on the only person you could, a small boy who had no idea why you didn't like him," Minerva finally said what she'd wanted to for a long time. "Harry is a wonderful child, and you never deserved to have him in your care."

"I NEVER WANTED HIM! I HATE HIM!" Petunia screamed at Minerva, before pulling herself together, and continuing in a slightly less voluminous voice. "He's rotten to the core, just like his father."

Severus would have agreed with her, but Minerva answered instead, proving that she knew more about Petunia's relationship with the Potters than Severus had been aware. "James tried his hardest to reconcile you and Lily, and you threw it in his face. You, Mrs. Dursley, are a petty, cruel, very sad woman, who just because she couldn't get her way, decided to hurt the son of one of the people who loved her most in the world."

Petunia denied it. "Lily didn't love me."

"Yes, she did," Severus knew that what he was about to say wouldn't go down well with Petunia, even though Lily had had good

intentions. "Lily was going to pay for the tuition of any of your children if they turned out to be magical."

"No child of mine would ever turn out to be a freak like you lot," Petunia hissed. "Now I want Marge put back to normal, and I want you both out of my house."

Minerva sighed and gave up. No matter what she said, Petunia would never again see Lily as she once did. "Severus, would you do the honors?"

Severus pointed his wand at the blob, uttered what to Petunia sounded like mumbo-jumbo, and moments later Marge was back, spluttering angrily. "I'm going to make that boy pay for this."

Severus aimed his wand again. "Obliviate."

Marge's face slackened, and Severus drawled what he wanted her to believe, that she'd had dinner, and that Harry had left. He then turned to Petunia. "I suggest you never mention this to anyone, not that they'd believe you."

Petunia had no intention of telling anyone what had happened. Instead, as she had with Harry, she pointed at the door. "Now get out, freaks."

Minerva was unmoved by Petunia's show of dominance. "We are leaving to find Harry, and he had better not have a single scratch on him, otherwise I will hold you responsible. I will see you next year."

"He's not coming back," Vernon decided to put his foot down. His face now bore the imprint of a purpling handprint, and his cheek was throbbing painfully, and it was this that had pushed him to finally say something.

"In that case, I'll cancel the monthly stipend you and your wife receive for taking care of Harry," Minerva watched them both sag, and her lips tightened in disgust. "I thought so. As I said, I'll see you next year."

One they were outside of the wards, Severus tried several spells. "I cannot locate the tiresome brat."

"Severus!" Minerva growled at him. "You are as bad as the Dursleys."

Severus ignored the comment but when he next spoke about Harry, he was a little politer. "We're going to need help finding Potter."

Harry had just finished drinking a can of coke that he was using to wash down the last of his fish and chips, when he heard a familiar voice calling his name. Getting to his feet, he rushed over to the man who'd just come into the chip shop. "Charlie, what are you doing here?"

"You needed me and I came," Charlie held Harry at arm's length, examining him carefully. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine but I was hungry," Harry nodded towards the table where little remained of the meal he'd bought for himself.

"Sit back down," Charlie was about to head over to the counter to buy himself fish and chips when he realized he didn't have any Muggle money. "On second thoughts, let's go."

Harry had heard Charlie's stomach grumble, and he pulled out a ten pound note. "Here."

"Thanks," Charlie took the money from Harry, and headed towards the counter. "I'll have whatever he had." He then turned to Harry. "Can you deal with this for me, and I'll just go let someone know I've found you."

Charlie was back a few minutes later, and he sat down to begin his meal. "I'm starving. I'll pay you back later for this."

"You don't have to," Harry refused, and then began to question Charlie. "How did you know I was missing, and how did you know where to find me?"

"When you performed accidental magic, alarms went off at the Ministry," Charlie stopped speaking to take a mouthful of fish, which he ate before continuing. "Dad was working late, and he floored me via international floo, and I came as soon as I'd cleared it with Tula. If we hadn't been so busy, she would have come as well."

Harry suffered a moment of guilt. "I'm sorry you had to come all this way for nothing."

"Harry, you're not nothing," Charlie ruffled Harry's hair. "Don't ever think that."

"Okay," Harry smiled, then his visage changed when he heard a noise and glanced around, paling at the sight of the person who was standing there. "I'm in big trouble, aren't I? Are you going to take me to Azkaban?"

Tonks, who was dressed in what Harry believed was full Auror uniform, quickly guessed that Harry was afraid she was going to arrest him. "Harry, I haven't qualified yet. I've still got two weeks left before I have to take my final exam. This is a trainee's uniform."

"Will someone else be coming to take me to Azkaban?" Harry was now worried that the Ministry had sent Tonks ahead to soften the blow.

Tonks shook her head. "Absolutely not. Harry, what you did to that woman was an accident, and according to Professor McGonagall and your cousin Dudley, she goaded you into doing it."

"I didn't mean to do it," Harry dropped his head in shame. "But I was just so angry. She said horrible things about Dad."

"I know, Harry," Tonks had already spoken to Minerva in detail about what Dudley had said.

"Would someone care to tell me exactly what happened?" Charlie interjected, his mouth full of chips, as he tried to swallow and talk at the same time. "I only know that Harry set off alarms at the Ministry, and Dad said he'd done a runner from his relatives' place, but I hadn't quite gotten around to finding out why he'd done so."

"That's because you were too busy stuffing your face with food," Tonks didn't bother to hide her disgust.

"I haven't eaten all day," Charlie kicked out a chair. "Why don't you sit down and stuff your face? I might not have to listen to your nagging then."

Tonks scowled at him. "Some of us have serious work to do, Chaz."

"A little high and mighty, aren't we, Nymie, especially for someone who isn't qualified yet?" Charlie snapped at the girl.

When Tonks made another angry retort, Harry just sat there, wondering how things had devolved into a rather loud argument between the two adults. It was the fish & chip shop owner who put a stop to things. "Excuse me, I think a little less noise would be good. I've got other customers you know."

Both Tonks and Charlie went red, and they both apologized to the owner. Tonks sat down, and she lowered her voice so that it wouldn't carry to the chip shop owner. "Harry's relatives were vile about his parents, and Harry used accidental magic to transform one of them into a massive pile of pus. The result of his actions was that he was ordered by Petunia Dursley to collect his things, and to get out of the house."

"Do I have to go back?" Harry asked worriedly. "My two weeks aren't really up until the morning."

Tonks shook her head. "I'm going to take you back to Hogwarts tonight."

"He's coming home with me," Charlie said officiously. "Mum will be worried sick, and I have no doubt that Ginny, Ron and the twins would like to see him."

"And Professor McGonagall is waiting for Harry at Hogwarts," Tonks began to argue.

"Then you can tell her that I've taken Harry home with me, and she's welcome to come by," Charlie said firmly, spearing a large piece of fish and putting it in Tonks' mouth, stopping her from saying anything else.

Harry couldn't help but giggle at Tonks' surprised look, and he used the opportunity to butt back into the conversation. "Charlie, how did you find me?"

"You've told me about this place at least ten times, and I figured you'd be scared, and would hide out somewhere Muggle. So I

walked around the mell..." Here Charlie was interrupted by Tonks, who had by now swallowed her fish.

"It's mall, Chaz! M A L L! Mall!" Tonks sarcastically corrected him, before addressing Harry. "And if Charlie hadn't found you, I certainly would have."

Charlie took the conversation again. "As I was saying, I walked around the MALL a few times before I tried a point me spell, and it led me here."

Even though Harry was now alleviated of any concern about the Ministry, he still had one more person who he was afraid would punish him for what he'd done, and he looked over at Charlie, "Am I in trouble with you for running away?"

Charlie, as Tonks had, shook his head. "No, Harry. This time it wasn't your fault. You were frightened, and you were thrown out of your Aunt's house, so you didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. I'm just glad that you had the good sense to go somewhere safe."

Tonks pinched one of Charlie's chips. "And somewhere that serves good food."

"Get your own," Charlie prodded Tonks with his fork when she tried to pinch another chip. "But more seriously, Harry, if you should ever get into trouble again like this, put out your wand arm, and catch the Knight Bus. If you don't have any money on you, just tell them that's it an emergency and ask them to take you to the Burrow."

Having ridden the Knight Bus before, Harry knew he should have thought of that. "Sorry, I didn't even think about it."

"It's alright, Harry," Charlie smiled. "All that matters is that you're okay."

More than a little relieved that he wasn't in trouble with anyone, Harry sank back into his chair. "So am I going to the Burrow now?"

Tonks met Charlie's set gaze, and she nodded. "I'll head back to Hogwarts and inform the Professor of where you're going." She glanced around at the chip shop, where most of the customers were

obviously paying attention to them. "But first I'd better get the obliviation team in here."

The moment Harry appeared with Charlie at the Burrow, he was scooped into a bear hug by Molly Weasley. "You had us all worried to death, Harry."

When Harry was released he saw that the Weasley matriarch had tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry," Molly brushed her eyes with the corner of her apron, and to cover up her distress, she headed towards the kitchen. "I'll go make a pot of tea."

Having heard the arrivals, Ginny came flying down the stairs, and into Harry's arms. "Harry, you're here."

Harry staggered backwards, landing on the sofa. "Oomph!"

"I think you're crushing him, Gin," George pulled his sister off. "Thought you'd have a spot of late night fun, Harry?"

"Something like that," Harry got to his feet, glad that George had pulled Ginny off him.

"So what happened?" Ron asked, having hurried down right behind Ginny.

Harry began to tell them, only to be interrupted by Ron. "You really turned her into a big pile of mush?"

Harry couldn't help but smile now that his initial fright had receded. "Yeah. I didn't mean to; it just happened."

"And then what happened?" Ginny was quite excited by what Harry had done.

"My Aunt slapped me," Harry touched his cheek and frowned.

Charlie, who'd only been half listening, swung around. "She hit you?"

"It wasn't that bad," Harry had had far worse. "But what was really strange was that Uncle Vernon and Dudley both screamed out at the same time."

"Retribution spell," Molly immediately deduced as she bustled in with a large tray filled with tea cups, a teapot, and a large plate piled high with biscuits of every type imaginable.

"What's that?" Harry asked, never having heard of one before. He took a big jammy dodger while he waited for the answer.

"Simply put, if someone harms you then whatever they do either rebounds onto them, or onto someone else," Molly put it in basic terms. "And in your case it looks like someone put the spell on your Aunt so that if she hurt you it would rebound onto to your Uncle and cousin."

"Serves them right," Fred glanced over at his mother who was sipping her cup of tea. "How exactly does this spell work?"

"Forget it, Fred," Molly warned, before turning her gaze to George. "You too."

When Molly glanced away, the two boys exchanged wicked glances. They had every intention of finding out what the incantation for the spell was somehow, and how to apply it.

"Go on then, Harry," Ron urged, wanting to know what else had happened.

"There's not much more to tell," Harry continued as Charlie and Molly both left the room and went into Molly's sewing room, meaning that they obviously wanted to talk privately without the children being able to overhear. "Aunt Petunia threw me out, and I caught the bus into town. Because I was hungry I went to the chip shop that Tonks had taken me to. That was where Charlie and Tonks found me, and then they started arguing."

"With you?" Ginny asked.

"No, with each other," Harry told the children what had been said.

Ginny smirked. "They like each other."

Harry snorted. "I don't think so. They were almost at each other's throats. Charlie stabbed her in the hand with his fork when she stole some of his chips."

Ginny checked behind her to make sure that the door to her mother's sewing room was firmly closed. "It's like in Mum's romance novels that I read sometimes."

"You know you aren't supposed to be reading those," Fred told his sister.

"And you shouldn't be doing lots of things but you still do," Ginny retorted, before she returned to talking to Harry. "Anyway, in these books the beautiful witch meets the handsome wizard and..."

Fred interrupted Ginny, "...they live happily ever after but not before they snog a lot."

Ginny went bright red. "They do kiss but it's not how you put it."

George had never read one of the books but he could guess what they were like. "Don't tell me. The witch and wizard don't like each other when they first meet, and so of course they argue a lot. Then they realize that they love each other, fall into one another's arms and start snogging, and finally they live happily ever after!"

"Yes," Ginny couldn't argue with George's summation.

Fred burst out laughing at his sister's deflated face, and also at her crazy notion. "And you think that Tonks and Charlie are going to do that?"

"Harry said that they were rude to each other when he went to Romania, and they were the same tonight," Ginny announced in a superior voice. "I bet you anything that they end up together."

"Four sickles that they don't," Fred held out his hand and shook Ginny's when she offered her hand in return. "What is the time limit?"

"Two years," Ginny knew that was how long it usually took the couples in the books to get together.

George also held out his hand. "I'll also take that bet."

Ginny shook it, and then looked at Harry and Ron who both shrugged, and also took the bet for the same amount. "You're all going to be sorry when I win."

"No," George stood up and stretched, pointing towards his siblings and Harry. "You're going to be paying me, him, him, and him."

"We'll see," Ginny got up and yawned. "Gosh, I'm tired."

Harry also began yawning, set off by Ginny. "You're not the only one."

Ginny made a suggestion. "Perhaps we should go back to bed."

"You can sleep in with me," Ron offered.

"Thanks, Ron," Harry glanced at the closed door. "Should we tell them that we're going to bed?"

"Nah, they'll guess where we've gone," Ron started towards the stairs. "Come on. We have to make a bed up for you."

The group traipsed tiredly up the stairs. They were all sound asleep when Tonks and Minerva arrived, and therefore didn't hear them talking to Molly and Charlie, before taking their leave. Nor did they hear Arthur arriving home, or the three adults checking on them before going to sleep themselves.

Next Chapter: Hermione's first kiss doesn't exactly go to plan.

Chapter 22: First Kiss

Harry was pleased when the upshot of his escapade was that he got to spend just over a week with Charlie at the dragon reserve. And not being a punishment, this time it was a far more pleasant experience, with Harry shadowing Charlie for the duration of his stay.

But eventually it was time to leave, and Charlie, who'd refused to let Harry portkey back alone, picked up Harry's suitcase. "There's been a slight change of plan - Dad flooded me late last night. You won't be going to stay with Susan and her aunt just yet."

Harry's face dropped. "Is it because of what happened at the Dursleys?"

Charlie could see immediately that was Harry not only disappointed, but he was also worried. "Don't get panicking; it has nothing to do with that. Madam Bones said that instead of sitting in with the students who are about to qualify, you would do better sitting in with the new students instead."

Harry was rather disappointed. He had been looking forward to spending some time with Tonks. "So where am I going?"

"To stay with Professor McGonagall," Charlie took Harry's arm. "She's rented a house out, and she's got a nice surprise for you."

"What sort of surprise?" Harry asked.

"Wait and see," Charlie winked at Harry, and set off the portkey.

When Harry arrived, he found out that Minerva had rented a massive old house, which was full of hidey holes and maze-like corridors. Minerva had done it because her apartment was far too small for Harry's surprise - she'd invited all of his friends to stay - and she also didn't think the neighbors would appreciate a herd of children traipsing throughout the building.

Upon discovering what she'd done, Harry was both pleased and concerned: pleased that his friends would be arriving over the course of the two weeks he was to stay with Minerva, and concerned because of the cost of renting a house. Harry's concern, however, vanished once Minerva had explained about the money

James Potter had left for Harry's care. And so with that weight lifted from his mind, Harry was free to enjoy himself.

And enjoy himself he did. He was currently playing 'hide and seek', something Harry had never had the opportunity to experience before. On discovering that Harry had missed out on many similar childhood pastimes, Harry's companions all decided that they would spend time doing things that Harry had never done before. Luna had been the one to come up with the suggestion of teaching Harry to play hide and seek, and each of the other girls also subsequently came up with ideas: Hermione's suggestion surprised no-one - scrabble – a Muggle word game that required some intellect; Susan had suggested magical conkers – the difference between that and Muggle conkers, being that the losing conker squirted its owner with conker juice rather than smashing to pieces; and Ginny suggested Racing Demon – a rather noisy card game.

Harry had opted to play hide and seek first, and had subsequently been designated as 'it'. He was therefore currently hiding his face and counting, while the girls had gone off in different directions to hide from him. Once he'd finished counting, Harry headed towards the corridor he'd seen Susan heading down when he'd sneakily peeked. The corridor curved and wound its way around the ground floor, but eventually it came to an end at the library. Creeping silently along, and checking rooms along the way, Harry found no-one. Harry knew then that Susan had to be in the library, and he stealthily made his way inside, grinning to himself when he heard a muffled sneeze coming from behind the curtains in the darkened room. Harry reached out, grabbed a curtain, and pulled it back. "Got you!"

Susan burst out of the bay window giggling. "I'm glad to get out of there, it was awfully hot. And rather dusty – I think this game is going to leave us all in need of a shower."

"But it is fun," Harry flashed a carefree smile at his friend. "I'm off to find the others then."

Despite the heat in the room, Susan wished she could have pulled Harry back behind the curtains with her, but she had the feeling he would have run a mile if she had done so, so instead she joined him as Harry duly discovered all three remaining girls in no time at all. And the game began again, this time with Susan being 'it'.

In the blue damask decorated bedroom that he had chosen upon arriving, Harry was tossing and turning in the large bed that dominated the room. He would normally be asleep by now but the hot day had turned into a stuffy and still hot evening. The cooling spell he'd applied several times had constantly worn off before he could fall asleep, and after lying there for another few minutes, Harry gave up trying to sleep. Deciding to go with a Muggle method of cooling himself off, Harry opted to get a drink of water.

Making his way downstairs, he headed towards the kitchen and got a glass before filling it with ice-cold water from the fridge. Hearing the ceiling fan whirring around in the sitting room, Harry decided to cool down under it while he had his drink. When he walked into the room, he discovered he was not alone; Hermione was sitting on the sofa in floods of tears.

Harry's concerns about cooling off vanished, and he immediately turned his attention to his distraught friend. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

Hermione held up a letter. "This arrived just after I went to bed."

Harry took the tearstained letter from her, and began to read it, but Hermione didn't wait for Harry to finish, launching into an explanation of its contents. "George asked me to stay with him at the Burrow when I leave here, but Mummy and Daddy have said that I can't go - they said that I'm too young to be staying with a boy."

"But I'm a boy and they let you stay with me," When she coughed, Harry passed his water to Hermione, who gratefully took it, and gulped down the water thirstily – crying always left her parched.

"You're not older than me, and Professor McGonagall personally asked my parents if I could stay here. And they agreed because she told them that I'd be staying with three other girls," Hermione took another mouthful of the water.

"Your parents do know that Justin, Ron and Neville are coming to stay for a few days, don't they?" Harry had discovered that Minerva had also invited the three boys to join them but their current obligations had meant that they would be arriving far later than the girls.

"Yes," Hermione blew her nose on her handkerchief, and then finished the water. "And just like you, they're not older than me, and Professor McGonagall will be chaperoning."

Harry took back the empty glass. "I don't understand. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny will be at the Burrow, so why can't you stay there?"

Hermione's bottom lip trembled again. "Mrs. Weasley said that Ginny is going to be staying with Meredith, her best friend. And even though Mrs. Weasley will be there most of the time, Mummy and Daddy are worried about what might happen when Mrs. Weasley goes out on her visits." Molly usually took baked goods and the like to some of her elderly Muggle neighbors, who appreciated her kindness. She also went out if she received a message that one of her elderly neighbors was sick, and needed her aid. "I really thought that they would have trusted me more."

Harry realized then that most of Hermione's tears were probably derived from the lack of confidence Hermione's parents seemed to be displaying in his friend, particularly as Hermione had often said what a good relationship she had with her parents.

Harry therefore sat debating the problem for a short time, before coming up with a solution. "You've still got ten days to go here. Why don't I ask Aunt Minnie if I can invite George to stay? He can come over for the last few days when Ron comes to visit."

"I don't know what my parents would say," Hermione said worriedly, not wanting to deliberately deceive her parents.

"It's no different than Ron being here, and Aunt Minnie will still be able to act as a chaperone," Harry logically pointed out. "And she won't be leaving any of us alone to go visiting people, at least not without finding a replacement to sit in with us." This had happened on the second day when Minerva had been called away unexpectedly; Albus had stepped in to watch over the young children in her place. Unfortunately this would not be possible for Molly; her acting as a carer meant that she would not necessarily have time to fetch someone to take care of the children during an emergency, and it was this that most concerned Hermione's parents.

Hermione became hopeful. "I didn't think about that."

"That's because you're not sneaky like me," Harry grinned.

Hermione snorted at Harry's comment. "You are not sneaky, Harry. In fact I think you're probably the most honest person I know."

Harry had quite liked the idea of being thought of as sneaky, and his face fell. "So I'm boring then?"

"No, just truthful," Hermione pointed out the difference, before returning to the subject of George. "So you'll really ask Professor McGonagall if George can come to stay?"

"You're my friend, of course I will," Harry said brightly, even though for some strange reason he felt a little down about the whole thing.

"Oh Harry!" Hermione threw herself into Harry's arms, pushing him backwards on the sofa. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" Hermione dropped a kiss on Harry's cheek with every exclamation of 'thank you' she made. Unfortunately Hermione's display of thankful enthusiasm totally unbalanced them, and they both rolled off the sofa, Harry landing on top of Hermione.

For a moment neither of them moved, both winded by the drop, until Harry stirred. He didn't know what he thought he was doing but when he looked down at Hermione, he could see that her lips were right beneath his, and as if magnetically drawn, he lowered his head to close that last few inches, and kissed her.

At first Hermione lay there in shock. She had only kissed Harry to say thank you, and had gotten little carried away in her excitement, resulting in their accidental tumble onto the floor. But what was happening now was no accident, and while Hermione knew she should have pushed Harry off her, she liked the feeling of his lips pressed against her own. So rather than rejecting Harry, instead she closed her eyes, and returned the kiss, all thoughts of George disappearing like smoke on the wind.

But then, all at once, it was over, and she was free, and Harry was standing over her, a look of horror on his face. "I'm so, so sorry, Hermione. I don't know why I did that."

Hermione could see that Harry was genuinely upset, and she discovered that so was she, but for an entirely different reason.

When she responded to his apology, her voice was therefore more than a little clipped. "You don't know why you kissed me?"

Completely mortified at what he'd done, Harry violently shook his head. "No. I know you like George, and I like Susan, and I..."

Harry wasn't allowed to get any further, Hermione latching onto his final comment, her upset turning into no small amount of hurt. "You like Susan and you still kissed me?"

Harry's pale face turned bright red. "Yes, but I like you as well."

Hermione was more than a little mollified at Harry's admission; she was also rather pleased. But she didn't want Harry to get the wrong idea by telling him that, and so instead she reminded him of the reason that she had been crying in the first place. "Harry, you do know that I like George, don't you?"

Harry again experienced a momentary pang of misery, and he nodded, before blurting out an apology and an explanation for the illicit kiss. "Yes, and I really am sorry, Hermione. I know it was wrong and that you like George but you were there, and your mouth was there, and before I knew what I was doing I kissed you. And now you're probably not going to want to be my friend anymore, and..."

Seeing tears in Harry's eyes, Hermione quickly realized that Harry truly believed she would end their friendship, and she put a hand on Harry's arm, stopping his diatribe. "Calm down, Harry, and take a deep breath. I know you're sorry, and I still want to be your friend."

Harry was filled with relief. "Thank you." He then looked down at the floor, before uncomfortably meeting Hermione's gaze. "Are you going to tell George what I did?"

At the worried look on Harry's face, Hermione's last bit of indignation dissipated. "No, Harry, I won't tell anyone, not even George," Hermione then made a suggestion, just wanting to put the whole thing behind them, and move on. "You've said you were sorry so let's just say it was an accident, and forget about it."

"Okay," Harry then fell silent for a short time, before deciding that it might be a good idea to go to bed. "Well, goodnight then."

He didn't get far, Hermione reaching out to grab his arm before he could move, as she remembered the information that Harry had proffered just after kissing her. "Harry, if you like Susan, why haven't you asked her to be your girlfriend?"

"Because she'd probably say no," Harry didn't have a great deal of confidence about his attraction for the opposite sex, and he had no idea that both Susan and Ginny liked him. Well, he had a feeling that Ginny did, but he suspected it was only because he was the Boy Who Lived, and not because he was simply Harry.

"Ask her, Harry," Hermione suggested, her own remorse about the kiss she'd just shared making her want to push Harry at someone else.

"I'll think about it," Harry promised, as he watched Hermione yawn. "We really had better go to bed."

"I think you're right," Hermione blushed when she went to hug Harry as she done every night so far during her stay. "Goodnight, Harry."

Harry briefly returned the hug, now a little nervous about holding his friend after what had happened. "Goodnight, Hermione."

Hermione kissed Harry's cheek, then she hurried out of the room, and Harry was left alone. But instead of following Hermione out of the room, he sat down on the sofa instead, and thought about what had happened.

After a short time, Harry came to a conclusion. Hermione obviously preferred George to him, so he decided that it would be better to put the evening behind him, and try to forget about what he had done as Hermione had told him to. Harry, however, had no idea that instead of being able to forget about the kiss, it was going to be at the forefront of his mind for some time to come.

And despite what she had told Harry about forgetting about the kiss, Hermione could think of little else as she returned to the bedroom she was sharing with Luna. Lying down on her bed, Hermione hugged her pillow to her, and thought about the kiss.

Up until then she had never really thought much about what her first kiss would be like. But if she had, Hermione suspected that the kiss

would have been everything she would have dreamt of as a first kiss. Her big problem now was that she really needed to talk to someone about what happened but she didn't dare share her experience with anyone else, particularly after promising Harry she would remain silent. "I'll just pretend it never happened."

"What never happened?" Luna's voice came out of the darkness.

"Nothing," Hermione hadn't realized that she had spoken out loud. "Sorry I woke you."

"You didn't wake me," Luna assured her friend. "But what never happened?"

Hermione couldn't think of a lie, and she therefore skirted around the truth. "I did something I shouldn't have. It was nice when it happened but I feel bad now."

"So although you feel bad about what happened, you enjoyed it while it was happening?" Luna checked to see if she had understood Hermione correctly.

"More than I should have," Hermione's voice dropped to a guilty whisper.

"Then just tell Professor McGonagall in the morning what you did," Luna suggested. "Maybe it will make you feel less guilty."

"I'll do that," Hermione rolled over. "Goodnight, Luna."

"Goodnight, Hermione," Luna smiled in the darkness, and closed her eyes, before making one final comment. "Or don't tell her if you think that it's something you don't want her to know. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Luna," Hermione repeated, now worried that maybe Luna had figured out what was bothering her. Then, deciding that there was no way Luna could have ever guessed that she and Harry had kissed, Hermione pushed her concerns aside, and after a few minutes, exhausted from her emotions and crying, she quickly fell asleep.

In her bed, Luna fell asleep just after Hermione, with a knowing smile on her face and a fresh glass of ice-cold water on her bedside table.

Wanting to make everything alright between himself and Hermione, Harry was as good as his word, and asked Minerva if George could come to stay. When questioned, Harry had reluctantly explained the reason behind his request – the honesty Hermione had accused of him possessing most evident – and Minerva had agreed to let George stay if Hermione's parents agreed.

Minerva therefore took Hermione with her to see the Grangers, where Minerva firmly assured the girl's parents that there would be absolutely nothing immoral going on under her roof. Hermione had also explained to her parents how upset she had been that they had not trusted her, and after a discussion about restrictions, the couple had finally agreed that George could stay. However, his visit had been allowed on the proviso that if George overstepped his boundaries in any way, Hermione would be sent home. Hermione had agreed to her parents' terms immediately, promising to tell Minerva should anything untoward occur.

Therefore, with the Grangers' reluctant agreement, George, Fred (who had no intention of letting George leave him behind) and Ron arrived at the start of the second week – George wanting to arrive earlier than planned. They also had Justin with them, the boy having begged his parents to allow him to cut short his visit to France with them, so that he could join his friends. Justin had hardly been surprised when they said yes; his mother never refused him anything, and his father always seemed glad to get rid of Justin and to have his wife to himself. Neville's grandmother, however, refused to let him go so early, and so Neville was to arrive a few days before the end of the sojourn, after which he would go to the Burrow with Ron.

From his vantage point on his broomstick, while he looked for the snitch in a game of quidditch that had sprung up, Harry felt a tiny pang of something he didn't know how to label as he watched George and Hermione disappear beyond the tree line.

Despite deciding not to dwell on the kiss he'd shared with Hermione, George's arrival the previous night had refocused Harry's thoughts on it again. And yet again, Harry also found himself thinking about

Hermione's suggestion that he ask Susan to be his girlfriend, but he had still been unable to make up his mind about what to do, guilt over the kiss impairing his judgment. Completely confused as to how to sort out his feelings, Harry decided that he needed to talk to someone about it, but he was at a loss as to whom. He couldn't ask Charlie; George was his brother. He couldn't ask Minerva; he'd be too embarrassed, and he was also worried about what she would say if she found out what he had done.

Suddenly it occurred to Harry who to ask, and he decided that once the game of quidditch was over, he'd send a missive with Hedwig. Yells then brought Harry out of his daydream, and all thoughts of Hermione and Susan vanished as he shot after the snitch that Ginny was also trying to grab.

George had led Hermione well away from the others, wanting to talk to her in private. And they were now strolling toward a small lake that edged the property. "I'm sorry your parents gave you a hard time about staying at the Burrow."

Hermione had written to George telling him that she had asked them during their family holiday in Italy. "Mummy and Daddy said to let them think about it when we were on holiday, and I really thought that they'd say yes."

"Well, at least I can see you now, thanks to Harry," George's face turned a becoming shade of pink.

"Yes, you can," Hermione's own cheeks were burning, but it wasn't because of George's comment; it was the mention of Harry and the image that brought to her mind. "Mummy and Daddy weren't really happy when they found out that Harry wanted to invite you to stay while I was here, but Professor McGonagall assured them that I would be perfectly safe, and that you were a decent kind of person."

George felt rather touched that Minerva had vouched for him. "I like to think I am."

"I think you are," Hermione went red as she said it.

Bolstered by Hermione's comment, George stopped walking, and turned to face the bushy haired girl. "Hermione, would you like to be my girlfriend?"

Hermione crushed the tiny spasm of guilt that went through her, and she nodded. "Yes."

George stepped closer, and Hermione knew that he was going to kiss her. Her stomach flip-flopped over, and she closed her eyes when he lowered his head, before placing his lips over hers...

Luna, Ginny and Susan gathered around Hermione, Susan's face the most excited. "So did he kiss you?"

Hermione hadn't expected this interrogation session, but she answered honestly. "Yes."

"And what was it like?" Luna's usually dreamy voice was rather questioning, and Hermione again wondered if the girl knew about Harry and that kiss.

Hermione therefore thought carefully about her answer before answering, "It was nice."

"Nice?" Susan's voice held a hint of scorn. "Your first kiss was just nice?"

"She's probably embarrassed," Ginny piped up. "It was George kissing her!"

"You're only saying that because he's your brother," Susan said in exasperation. "If it had been Harry kissing her, you'd have said something different."

Ginny sighed dreamily. "I wish I could give Harry his first kiss."

All three girls knew that Ginny had a thumping great crush on Harry, and they therefore weren't surprised by her comment. Susan scowled though, not enjoying the thought of Harry kissing anyone but her.

Hermione's cheeks turned pink when a smirking Luna turned to Ginny and asked, "How do you know that Harry hasn't already had a first kiss?"

Ginny snorted in derision. "Harry hasn't got a girlfriend, and we'd know if he'd kissed someone."

Now almost sure that Luna knew about the kiss, Hermione's cheeks began to burn even more brightly, and she decided to change the subject. "Why don't we talk about something else?"

Susan shook her head. "I want to know what your first kiss was really like. It can't just have been 'nice'!"

Hermione was aware that Susan would nag her until she got more details, and she reluctantly admitted that it had been more than nice. "Okay, my first kiss was amazing."

Luna's eyes went wide. "How long did it last?"

"Long enough," Hermione avoided going into exact details.

Susan, however, didn't, and she asked a more pointed question. "Did he open his mouth?"

"Gross!" Ginny pulled a face and made a gagging sound. "I don't want to know that."

"No, he didn't," Ignoring Ginny's revulsion, Hermione still answered the question.

"But it was perfect, wasn't it?" Luna had images of her first kiss; the boy was currently faceless but the moment would be beyond just right, it would be...

Her thoughts were interrupted when Hermione answered honestly, "Yes, my first kiss was perfect."

Susan and Luna both sighed dreamily, and Ginny gagged once more, prompting Susan to punch her in the arm. "Ginny, we know George is your brother but just get over it."

Ginny smiled tightly at Hermione, and ground out the right response. "I'm glad you had a perfect first kiss, even if it was with my brother."

"Thank you," Hermione's cheeks flared up again, and she was grateful when Luna changed the subject to talk about what games they should play now that the boys were here.

Alone in their room later that night, Hermione decided she had to find out whether Luna knew about her real first kiss. "Luna, can I ask you something?"

"Is it about you and Harry kissing?" Luna asked bluntly.

"How did you find out?" Hermione asked, her suspicions now confirmed.

"I went downstairs for a glass of water, and I heard voices. Then I heard a bump, so I went to see if everything was alright, and you and Harry were kissing, so I left," Luna climbed onto the bed beside Hermione.

"So that's why you asked how long the kiss lasted?" Hermione had believed Luna had known.

"Yes," Luna nodded. "Was it really perfect?"

Unable to help herself, Hermione gave a tiny smile, showing off her even white teeth. "It was."

"And what about George's kiss?" Luna delved deeper.

"It was nice," Hermione repeated her earlier comment.

"But not as nice as Harry's?" Luna probed.

"Luna, it doesn't matter which kiss was nicer," Hermione really didn't want to answer the question. "I'm going out with George now."

"Why?" Luna asked pointedly. "You said Harry's kiss was perfect."

Hermione's cheeks turned red, a color they were rapidly getting used to sporting. "It was but I like George."

"And what about Harry? Do you like him?" Luna wasn't ready to give up on the couple she thought should be together.

"Yes," Hermione finally admitted out loud that she had some feelings for Harry, "but not as much as I like George, and besides Harry likes someone else."

"Who does Harry like?" Luna asked excitedly.

Having accidentally spilled the beans, Hermione hesitated before responding. "Luna, if I tell you who Harry likes, you have to promise not to tell anyone. I told Harry that I'd keep the kiss quiet, and I think that also sort of covers who he likes as well."

"I promise," Luna responded quickly, eager to find out.

"He likes Susan," Hermione was almost immediately hit with a minor bout of panic that she shouldn't have told Luna, despite the girl keeping quiet about the kiss. "But you really can't tell anyone."

"Don't worry, I won't," Luna took Hermione's hairbrush from her friend's shaking hand, and began to brush out her hair, before plaiting it for her.

Hermione was surprised at Luna's skill. "How do you know how to do that?"

"I've been practicing doing "normal" things with the girls in Ravenclaw because of what you said," Luna announced proudly. "And I think they're my friends now."

Hermione was rather pleased that the efforts she thought had gone to waste had borne fruit. "I'm glad I could help you make friends, Luna."

"So am I. But although the girls in dorm are my friends now, you are my best girl friend," Luna told the girl who had helped her to reach a pleasant footing with her dorm mates. She then remembered about Harry, and how she also considered him to be her best friend. "And Harry is my best boy friend."

Hermione suddenly realized that it was a similar situation for her. "I would have to say that Harry is my best male friend as well. But you're my best girl friend." Even though Hermione had known Susan longer, she felt more relaxed and at ease with the younger blonde girl.

Hermione's comment brought a rather pleased Luna back onto the subject of George. "As your best girl friend then it is my duty to tell you that I know you're making a mistake going out with George. You should be going out with Harry."

"How can you know that?" Hermione asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"I have the same gift Mummy had; I can tell if people should be together," Luna hesitated, before being entirely truthful. "Well, sometimes I can."

Hermione didn't disparage Luna's claim but she did suggest that Luna might be mistaken about her and Harry. "I think you might have got this one wrong, Luna. Harry likes Susan, and I like George."

"I know. But I also know that I'm right about you and Harry," Luna said in a firm voice.

"Why didn't you say anything before now?" Hermione asked.

"I didn't know until I saw you and Harry kissing," Luna explained. "My gift is fairly new and I'm not used to it yet."

"So you might be wrong," Hermione switched off the lights, the house being of Muggle origins but now in a wizarding area.

Luna shook her head in the darkness. "I don't think so."

"But you don't really know, do you?" Hermione challenged.

"I'm pretty sure," Luna answered, now starting to doubt herself somewhat, but she still put forth another opinion she had. "And I think George and Susan would make a better couple than you and George."

"Luna, do you know that or think it?" Hermione asked.

"Think it," Luna responded honestly. "But I bet I'm right."

Not having a real answer to Luna's comment, Hermione did the only thing she could do, and wished her roommate goodnight, before turning over, and falling asleep.

Two days after learning that Hermione was dating George, Harry was sitting brooding in the shade of a tree, the remaining children all involved in an obligatory study session. Harry had, however, claimed a headache, and seeing that he looked rather peaky, Minerva had sent him out for some fresh air, rather than dosing him with a potion. Harry's headache, however, wasn't getting any better when a voice suddenly startled him. "All alone?"

"Tonks!" Harry jumped up, and wrapped his arms around her. "What are you doing here? I only expected a firecall."

Tonks hugged Harry hard before letting him go. "From the babbling tone of your letter, I thought you needed some private face to face advice, and I had some spare time, so here I am. Now tell me, what's the problem?"

"I don't know what to do," Harry got straight to the point, trusting Tonks implicitly. "Tonks, I kissed Hermione."

Tonks gave a knowing smile. "So you want to ask her out but don't know how to?"

"Not exactly," Harry wasn't surprised Tonks had jumped to that conclusion. "Hermione is going out with George."

Tonks was now confused. "The two of you kissed but she's going out with George?"

Harry told Tonks the whole story about how Hermione had been upset, and what the outcome of her gratefulness had been. "I didn't mean for it to happen," Harry was bright red. "It just did."

"Okay," Tonks thought for a second before responding. "Do you like Hermione?"

"Yes, but I also like Susan," Harry owned up to his feelings.

Now Tonks was finally beginning to understand Harry's predicament, and she set out her understanding of the situation from Harry's

garbled rendition of what had happened. "So you like both Susan and Hermione. You kissed Hermione, but Hermione likes George, who she's now going out with. And you don't know if Susan likes you or not."

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "And I don't know what to do."

"Well, you can't ask Hermione out," Tonks eliminated that option. "Which leaves you with asking Susan out. So why don't you do that?"

"Because I feel bad about the kiss," Harry laid out his worries.

Tonks had been in a similar situation herself before, and understood where Harry was coming from, "And did Hermione feel bad about kissing you?"

"I don't think so, she didn't..." About to say that Hermione hadn't kissed him, and that it had been entirely his fault, Harry suddenly realized something. "She kissed me back!"

Tonks could see that this had surprised Harry. "You didn't remember that until now?"

"No," Harry was now even more confused. "But why would she kiss me back when she likes George?"

"You kissed her, and you like Susan," Tonks pointed out. "It was probably the same for Hermione. She kissed you back without really thinking about the consequences. For all you know she feels just as bad as you do about what happened."

"She can't feel that bad," Harry responded, totally unaware that his voice was slightly bitter, "otherwise she wouldn't be going out with George."

Tonks, however, had heard the resentment. "Harry, are you upset that Hermione is going out with George?"

"No, of course not," Harry immediately denied it. "I'm the one who asked if George could be here for her."

Tonks wasn't entirely convinced by Harry's denial, but she let it slide. "Harry, if that's the case, that perhaps you should take a leaf out of Hermione's book, and put the whole kiss behind you."

"And do you think that I should ask Susan to be my girlfriend?" Harry asked, deciding that Tonks was right about Hermione.

"If that's what you want," Tonks wasn't going to make Harry's decisions for him.

"I don't know," Harry was still at a loss.

Something that was very evident to Tonks, and despite her intention to not make decisions for Harry, Tonks still had a few words of advice for him. "Harry, I know you like Hermione but just because you can't ask her out, it doesn't mean that you should ask Susan out by default. Only ask Susan to be your girlfriend if that's what you really want. Otherwise it won't work."

Harry could hear more than a little sadness in Tonks' voice. "How can you know that?"

"I once liked someone, and even though he was my friend, he was never interested in me," Tonks didn't tell Harry that it was Charlie she talking about. "So I went out with someone else instead thinking that it would make me forget about him, but it didn't, and I ended up hurting this other boy."

"How?" Harry asked before realizing that that was probably prying. "Sorry, I'm being nosey aren't I?"

"It's alright, Harry. I don't mind telling you," Tonks assured him. "I was supposed to get married to the other boy last year but a week before the wedding I called it off."

"But you're only twenty-one!" Harry pointed out. "That's a bit young isn't it?"

"I'm not twenty-one yet," Tonks corrected Harry.

Harry frowned as he made some quick calculations in his head. "But you've qualified as an Auror, and you said that takes three years, and you left school at eighteen."

"I'm the same age as Charlie, Harry," Tonks reminded him, having already told Harry this before. "And as for my training, I took an accelerated course, which lasted two years."

Harry's mouth formed an 'o' - Tonks had to be cleverer than he'd realized if she had done that. "But you weren't in Ravenclaw."

"I could have been - the Sorting Hat offered me a choice, and since a girl I'd befriended on the train, Beth, had gone into Hufflepuff, I chose that house," Tonks explained. "And the boy I should have married was also in Hufflepuff; not that I knew him then."

Harry accepted Tonks' explanation, but still felt he had a point to make about her young age. "Alright, but you were still really young to get married."

"Lots of witches and wizards get married really young," Tonks informed him. "Some, like Charlie's parents, marry as soon as they leave school, and others have been known to get married while still at school."

"How old do you have to be to get married in the wizarding world?" Harry believed it was eighteen in Muggle England, not realizing that a person could actually marry at sixteen with parental consent.

"Sixteen," Tonks informed him. "And you don't need your parents' permission."

"Sixteen!" Harry was surprised at the age. "But you can't know who you want to spend all your life with that soon."

"You're only saying that because you're barely thirteen, Harry," Tonks smiled. "And seeing as you've only just had your first kiss, you have no idea what it's like to be in love."

"I'm not thirteen until the end of the week," Harry did his own bit of reminding.

"Close enough though," Tonks knew she should have remembered from the previous year when Harry's birthday was. "But age aside, Harry, the point I'm trying to make is that you shouldn't go out with someone unless you truly like them for themselves."

Harry's response proved he'd gotten the message. "So don't go out with Susan just because Hermione is going out with George."

Tonks smiled. "You've got it."

Feeling a lot more settled, Harry smiled back at the young woman. "Thanks for talking to me."

"You're welcome, Harry," Tonks got to her feet. "Now I think it's time I met your friends."

Harry panicked. "But what will I tell them about why you're here?"

"You can tell them that I dropped by unexpectedly, which is true," Tonks grabbed Harry's hand. "Come on."

It was several hours later, after Tonks had left, and they were discussing her, that Justin made an announcement. "I've decided that I want to be an Auror."

"Copycat," Harry stuck out his tongue at Justin.

"It sounds brilliant," Ginny had also decided that it would be the perfect career. "So I'm a copycat as well."

"I wouldn't want to do it," Susan knew only too well what it meant to be an Auror. "I don't see Aunt Amy that often because of her job, so I end up spending a lot of time with Lucy."

"Who's Lucy?" Hermione asked.

"Our neighbor," Susan had known the red-headed woman since she was a baby. "When Aunt Amy took me in, Lucy offered up her services to earn some extra cash while she was training at University, and even now when Aunt Amy can't take care of me, Lucy does."

"Is she still at University?" George asked.

"No," Susan shook her head. "She's a freelance tutor, so students come to her. And because she's only next door, it means that no

matter what time Aunt Amy finishes work, she usually always gets to see me, even if it's only for ten minutes before bedtime."

"So will this Lucy be looking after you this summer?" Harry asked.

"While you're at BritAD, she will be," Susan informed him. "And when you're not there, if Aunt Amy is busy, then she'll have to take care of you too."

"So your Aunt doesn't get to see a lot of you really, does she?" Luna thought that was sad. She spent lots of time with her Dad.

"Work is pretty much her life," Susan wasn't upset by this. She was just grateful that Amelia had taken her in. "So you see, Justin, being an Auror is not only hard work but it rules what you do."

"I still want to do it," Justin declared. He'd always hated the idea of going into stockbrokerage, and now Tonks had given him a new direction. He also knew it would irritate the hell out of his father.

"Are you sure it wasn't just because you liked Tonks?" Fred teased. "I saw you looking at her."

"So were you," Justin retaliated, but didn't deny that he'd liked the pink-haired girl.

"She's hot," Fred declared.

"I'm going to tell Angelina that you said that," Ginny teased her older brother.

"Then, little sister, you'd better make sure you sleep with one eye open," Fred threatened.

"I won't say anything," Ginny hurriedly said. She had no intention of becoming one of Fred's victims. "So who's up for playing Racing Demon?"

Fred recognized the diplomatic change of subject for what it was, but he let it lie, and soon the entire group was involved in the noisy card game.

Downstairs, Minerva shook her head in dismay before she smiled. It was good to know that Harry seemed to have gotten over his terrible time at the Dursleys, and that he was enjoying himself. As an excited scream reached her ears, Minerva put down her book and headed for the kitchen to make a cup of tea; reading was going to be out of the question with that row going on overhead.

Next Chapter: Harry spends time at BritAD; Gilderoy Lockhart causes Amelia Bones problems; Harry receives a warning about a newspaper reporter.

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Chapter 23: British Auror Division

Harry's first day at BritAD began with Amelia taking him into the Ministry, and then into her office, where Harry looked around with interest. There was a large walnut desk in the room, and five matching filing walnut cabinets. A half-filled in-tray stood at the edge of the desk but the out-tray was completely bare. And apart from an ink-well and a blotter, there was little else to clutter the desk.

Amelia noticed Harry's interest. "I don't like untidiness, and I have a tendency to stay late to get everything in my in-tray dealt with. My assistant, Daniel, is usually here at five in the morning to deal with the incoming post, and he also deals with whatever I've placed in my outgoing tray from the previous night."

Harry had wondered what happened to the stuff that went in there. "Does he stay as late as you?"

"No," As she spoke, Amelia opened her desk and withdrew a pass. "He leaves at around three o'clock in the afternoon unless there is something I really need him here for."

Harry could see that the pass had 'Trainee Auror Harry Potter' printed on it. "Is that for me?"

"It is," Amelia handed it over. "Clip it to your shirt, and make sure you're wearing it at all times. I've authorized it so that you can gain access to anywhere in the Ministry but I would prefer it if you would only venture into certain areas with me or someone else in authority. Obviously in general areas you can go about freely as you wish."

Harry wondered what the 'certain areas' were but he guessed he would find out eventually. "I understand."

"Auror Valeris will be here shortly, and she'll be introducing you to your first class," Amelia informed Harry. "Do you have your notebook, parchment and quills?"

Harry patted his leather book bag. "Yes, thanks." He then smiled a little shyly. "And thank you for the letting me do this."

Amelia peered at Harry over her half-moon glasses. "You're my test subject, Harry."

Harry was a little puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Amelia began to explain her comment. "If things run smoothly with this trial run, I may allow future students who profess an interest in the training to also attend BritAD for a short period to see what it is about."

Harry wondered if who he was had made her pick him. "But why chose me?"

Harry's status as the Boy Who Lived had influenced Amelia somewhat in offering to let Harry participate in the first two weeks of training. "When Susan mentioned your interest in BritAD, and that you wanted to see what happened behind the scenes, I decided that it would be beneficial for both you and for BritAD if I conducted a trial run."

Harry could see the advantage for BritAD but not to himself; they would have an early warning as to who was good enough to join, and who was not. "How would it be beneficial for me?"

Amelia sat down, and indicated that Harry should do the same. "Because it will enable you to pick up a little advanced education that may prove useful."

"You mean in case You-Know-Who tries to come back again?" Harry was aware that Amelia knew all about the happenings at the end of the first year.

Amelia nodded. "Yes, Harry. What you're learning at school is all well and good but it won't save your life if you're attacked again. I've therefore asked the instructors to review the seventh year curriculum during the first week of training. It isn't something that is normally done but after reviewing the training in general, I believe it will be of use to everyone, and it will help the new students gain a steady footing before we throw them in at the deep end."

"Is that what used to happen?" Harry asked.

"They used to spend the first week in August learning new spells, and the like," Amelia told him. "But after speaking to some of the course instructors, I decided that since they have had five free weeks since leaving school, or even longer than that in some cases, it would be better to conduct a refresher course first."

Harry told Amelia what he'd originally believed. "Until Tonks told me more about the training, I had thought that the new students would start in September."

"That's the start of the school year," Amelia wasn't surprised that Harry had mentioned it; most of the trainees usually expected the training year to run from September. "Here we start our first year of training in August, and the year ends in July. The trainees then have a month off before they start their second year."

"And it usually takes three years?" Harry had taken out his notebook, and a Muggle pen, and was writing down everything that Amelia was saying.

"Yes, unless a trainee fails their final assessment. In that case, dependent upon how badly they did, they will either re-sit the entire third year, or just focus on the part in which they didn't do so well," After giving him this opportunity, Amelia was glad to see that Harry was truly interested. "If you decide to become an Auror, then you will start about five weeks after you finish your seventh year at Hogwarts, or, if you're an exceptional student, you will be allowed to join one year earlier, and like Auror Tonks you may be eligible for the accelerated two year program."

"When would I have to submit an application?" Harry looked up from his hurried scribbling.

"At the start of your sixth year if you intend to finish your schooling early, otherwise at the start of your seventh year," Amelia informed him. "But I hope to see you here again at the end of your fifth year."

"Is that the age when other students will be allowed to do what I'm doing?" Harry asked with interest.

"Exactly," Amelia had made an exception for Harry and his age, but she was unlikely to do it for any other younger students in future. "So if you enjoy this, you may return again then."

Harry used this opportunity in the conversation to ask a question. "Would I be able to return every year?"

"Let's just see how you get along this time," Amelia wasn't going to say yes without seeing how well Harry performed, and that he made sure that he kept up his grades at Hogwarts.

"I'll do my best," Harry promised, now optimistic that he might be able to come back well before his fifth year.

"I believe you will," Amelia smiled warmly, turning as a knock sounded at the door, and a tall woman with black hair, and even blacker eyes, came in.

"Good morning, Ma'am," the woman nodded her head at her superior.

"Good morning, Auror Valeris," Amelia stood up. "This is Harry Potter. Harry, this is Auror Suki Valeris. She teaches defense, and will be your first tutor for today."

After shaking hands, Harry was led out of the office, and along the corridor. "Thank you for coming to get me."

"It's my pleasure, Trainee Potter," Auror Valeris thought Harry was rather cute clutching his book bag and wearing an earnest expression. "During my class you'll be learning some of the seventh year defense spells that they teach at Hogwarts, and then you'll be demonstrating them at the end of each lesson."

Defense against the Dark Arts was Harry's favorite subject, and he usually got 'Outstanding' in his homework assignments, but he was still rather nervous at the thought of having to try seventh year spells. Harry repeated what he'd said to Amelia a few moments earlier. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask," Valeris opened a door. "In you go." Once inside, she turned to the trainees. "Good morning, I am Auror Valeris, and will be your defense tutor for your first year. I will learn your names as we go along. However, I am familiar with one of you already." She placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "As you probably all know, this is Harry Potter." She scowled at the whispering that sprung up.

"There will be no talking while I am speaking." The class quieted down. "Trainee Potter will be spending this week with us as an experiment to see whether it will be of benefit for other students who may wish to become Aurors, to experience firsthand the start of the training."

A girl Harry recognized held up her hand, and identified herself when Valeris nodded. "Trainee Marjorie Banks, Ma'am. Will Harry be expected to do the same work as us?"

"He will, Trainee Banks," Valeris confirmed, and a show of hands materialized. "We will initially be conducting a review of seventh year defense spells. And while I expect you all to know what I'm going to ask you to perform, due to his age and inexperience, I will be showing Trainee Potter the wand movements first. Please make sure you are ready to begin taking notes."

At Valeris' warning, the hands all lowered, and Valeris smiled down at Harry, and tapped his clothing, transforming them into the same trainee uniform the other students were wearing. "Take a seat, Trainee Potter. At lunchtime, Trainee Banks can take you to be outfitted correctly."

Harry chose the spare seat next to Marjorie Banks, who had been Head Girl before she left, and he took out his things, his Muggle ballpoint pen poised anxiously above the Muggle notepad he'd also placed on the desk. Marjorie stifled an indulgent smile at Harry's already obvious enthusiasm, before turning her attention to Auror Valeris. It was a good thing she did; Valeris swept swiftly over the subject matter, and all of the students, both Marjorie and Harry included, were hard-pushed to get down what she was saying.

After the theoretical portion of the lesson was over, the practical part began, and Harry watched nervously as each student went up to the front of the classroom, and then performed a spell or hex. Several of them flunked their spells, earning them a demerit mark.

Harry thought that they looked rather concerned over a demerit mark but at that point, he had no idea that twenty demerit marks meant that a student had to leave the program unless they earned enough merit marks to expunge any demerits that they had incurred. Because the last student had performed their spell correctly, it

meant that it was now Harry's turn, and he headed to the front of the class, his hands shaking slightly.

Valeris pulled out her wand, and as she had promised, she demonstrated the correct wand movement. She then repeated it, this time uttering 'Ut Exsisto Occultus', and Marjorie vanished.

Harry didn't mean to gasp but he couldn't help it. "Where has she gone, Auror Valeris?"

Valeris noted that Harry included her name in the question, something one of the Trainees had failed to, earning her a demerit mark. "I've placed her under an invisibility spell." She then uttered the counterspell, and Marjorie reappeared.

Valeris then turned to Harry. "Your turn, Trainee Potter. If you would first practice the wand movement, and then aim your wand at me."

Harry pulled out his wand, and closed his eyes, remembering the wand movement, and imitating it. "I think I have it, Ma'am."

"That was good, Trainee Potter," Valeris gently encouraged Harry, something she would never normally do with a student. "Now try the spell."

Harry aimed his wand at the teacher, and then again closed his eyes in order to concentrate, "Ut Exsisto Occultus".

The class gasped and Harry hurriedly opened his eyes to find his teacher had vanished. "I did it!"

Valeris reappeared. "Well done. A merit mark for you, Trainee Potter, for an excellent effort."

The class knew that Valeris had given Harry one of the easier spells, but it was still quite an achievement for a student of his age to manage such a spell. Harry beamed. "Thank you, Auror Valeris."

"Now I want you to try it again, Trainee Potter, but with your eyes open," Valeris wanted Harry to be able to see what he was doing.

Harry thought over the wand movement once more, kept his eyes firmly on his teacher, and repeated the spell.

Once again Valeris disappeared, and she reappeared moments later. "In future I want you to keep your eyes open, Trainee Potter."

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry acknowledged his teacher's demand.

Valeris pocketed her wand. "Class dismissed."

Marjorie grabbed Harry's arm. "I'll take you to be outfitted, and then you can keep me company at lunch."

"Thanks," Harry picked up his things before following Marjorie out. Over lunch he discovered that she was the only Hogwarts graduate there from her year. Four of the students had qualified the previous year; one was re-sitting the first year again after failing miserably at the end of term assessment, and the remaining five came from smaller schools dotted around the country or had been privately tutored. He also learnt that all of them, including Marjorie, were purebloods. After what Tonks had told him about her being the only half-blood, he'd deliberately asked about this point, particularly given that Justin, a Muggleborn, also wanted to go into Auror training.

The rest of the day was spent in the combat rooms where Harry quickly discovered that despite padded floors, it hurt when your opponent hit you with a spell hard enough to send you flying. After his successful morning, Harry was rather despondent about his efforts in the afternoon. His instructor, a small man named Auror Large, told Harry it was to be expected; he wasn't familiar with seventh year spells, nor was he as powerful as those students.

Harry cheered up a little after hearing this. When he arrived back at the Bones house, he ate dinner and fell asleep on the sofa, much to Susan's chagrin but not to Amelia's surprise.

Harry followed this routine all week, with combat and surveillance lessons in the afternoons, and varying subjects in the mornings: Tuesday was charms, Wednesday was potions, Thursday was transfiguration, and Friday was defense again. Harry discovered that this would change as the year progressed with additional subjects being added in.

On the weekend, Harry finally got to meet Lucy when Amelia had to go into work. The tiny redhead had ordered pizza in for them from

the Paranormal Pizza Parlor, and now they were all eating, and talking about Harry's final day of training. "I had to perform six spells yesterday, and I managed to take down Trainee Banks in a one-on-one duel."

Lucy could see that the young boy was rather excited by his achievements. "Did he mind?"

Harry corrected Lucy's assumption that Trainee Banks was male. "Marjorie Banks is a girl. She was Head Girl at Hogwarts last year, and she got me back in the next duel though."

"You sound as though you're having fun," Lucy remarked at Harry's excited face.

"I am," Harry swallowed a piece of pepperoni. "But I know that it wouldn't be like that normally if I was training for real. The instructors treat me a lot nicer than they do the other students because I'm younger."

Lucy thought Harry was a very sweet and level-headed boy, which was something she never imagined the Boy Who Lived would be. "I'm glad you realize that."

"So what spells did you learn?" Susan interrupted, more interested in what spells Harry had covered than in how his instructors had dealt with him.

"A bedazzling hex, a charm to blow something up, the Fiendfyre curse, a fixing charm, the rowboat spell, and a flame-freezing charm," Harry listed them off on his fingers as he went along.

"I bet you wish you'd learnt that last spell sooner," Susan blurted out without thinking. "Then you might not have gotten burnt during first year when you went after..." Her voice died away at Harry's glare.

Lucy could see that, as usual, Susan had obviously put her foot in it. She was quite used to the young girl's faux pas as she often made them. "You may as well tell me what you did."

"I don't think I can," Harry refused. "Not without Amelia's permission."

"Then I'll ask Amelia about what happened," Lucy was intrigued but she did not dwell on the matter, and returned to Harry's training. "So, what else have you been learning?"

A little annoyed at Susan, Harry continued telling the young woman about his day. Eventually though, Lucy ordered them both to bed, and she waited up until a tired Amelia arrived home. "Bad day?"

"You could say that," Amelia dropped her cloak onto the sofa, instead of hanging it up as she usually did. "I've had three Aurors up on disciplinary charges, and have had to suspend all of them for a month."

Lucy knew from experience that Amelia would not go into detail about what the Aurors had done, but talking things out with Lucy in a general sense was a way to blow off steam for Amelia. "I don't think Susan's evening went any better. She put her foot in it again."

"What has she done now?" Amelia really did not need any more hassle.

"She let slip about Harry getting burnt during his first year when he mentioned the flame-freezing spell he'd learnt yesterday," As she spoke, Lucy could not tell what Amelia was thinking. "When I asked him about it, he said that he couldn't tell me without your permission."

Amelia decided that the Auror training was definitely rubbing off on Harry. "Harry actually had that spell placed on him at the end of his first year but it wasn't strong to prevent him from being burnt."

"What was he doing that he would end up burnt?" Lucy asked bluntly.

Amelia trusted Lucy implicitly. Unlike her niece, Lucy knew how to keep her mouth shut. "Harry had an incident at school at the end of his first year where a teacher died."

"Quill?" Lucy remembered reading about it in the newspaper.

"Quirrell," Amelia corrected. "The teacher was trying to steal something that didn't belong to him, and one of the obstacles protecting the object he was seeking..."

Lucy interrupted. "I remember now. There was a rumor that it was the Philosopher's Stone."

"The rumor is correct," Amelia confirmed the newspaper report. "But as I was saying, one of the obstacles was black fire. Harry was worried about a friend who had already gone ahead, and he went after him but the spell placed on him failed and he was hurt."

"Badly?" Lucy asked. The newspaper report had merely stated about Quirrell and the Stone; nothing else had been revealed.

Amelia had bargained with the Prophet to keep Harry's and the other children's names out of the paper in exchange for a story on her. "Extremely. Harry almost died."

"Merlin!" Lucy was shocked. "He didn't say."

"Like you, Harry is turning out to be a little more discreet than my niece," Amelia decided that she would have to have another talk with Susan. "I sometimes despair of that girl. Her mouth still seems to be engaging before her brain does."

Lucy smiled and got to her feet. "Good luck with changing Susan. And send Harry round to me if you want to talk to her alone."

"Thank you," Amelia picked up her discarded cloak. "And thank you for looking after them again."

"I had a nice time," Lucy answered honestly. "Harry isn't anything like I expected. He's well mannered, fun, and quite down to earth."

"I thought the same," Amelia had also expected a very different boy than the one she'd met. "He has none of the arrogance that someone of his stature in the wizarding world might have been expected to display."

"To be truthful if I didn't know he was the Boy Who Lived, I would have assumed that he was just a normal boy," Lucy observed.

"That's because he really is just a normal boy," Amelia knew that was right on some levels, but she was also aware of something that

Harry wasn't, and she fully intended to talk to Harry about it later that week. "If you forget about the whole Boy Who Lived thing."

"I did," Lucy admitted. "It's getting late, and I'm sure you have things to do."

Amelia hugged Lucy. "I do, and I'll see you tomorrow probably."

"I'll be in," Lucy returned the hug, stepped away, and then vanished.

Lucy had been right about Amelia; she did have things to do. Heading into her study, Amelia began on the paperwork she hadn't had time to deal with at work; she wanted her Sunday free to talk to Susan, and maybe to Harry. It was almost two in the morning when she went to bed, and she was woken early when an urgent owl arrived requiring her attention at the Ministry. Lucy was already up, and came around to take care of both of the children, bringing her own work with her. And by the time Amelia returned home, both children had already retired to bed.

Harry's second week would be very different from his first. He was to spend it with a qualified Auror who would be taking him out on patrol with him or her. Harry therefore found himself assigned to an Auror Canton, who he discovered was seriously sycophantic, and not just towards him. Because of Harry's age, Canton had been assigned to remain within the vicinity of the Ministry and Diagon Alley, and Canton seemed to know everyone there, at least anyone who was anyone. Poor Harry had found himself cringing at the young woman's obsequious behavior towards anyone of importance, and he had tried to spend most of the time fading into the background. Unfortunately, however, Canton had not hesitated to introduce Harry, wrapping her arm around him, and telling anyone who would listen that she had been specially chosen to take care of him.

By the fourth day, Harry wished he was back in the combat rooms, even if he had spent most of his time flat on his back, and he was therefore thrilled when Amelia came into the Assignment room, and informed Canton that she was taking Harry away. "Auror Canton, I would like to steal Trainee Potter from you."

"Yes, Ma'am," Canton's voice quivered excitedly; she had no idea that the head of BritAD even knew who she was. "And I'd like to say that it's been a pleasure to take Trainee Potter under my wing."

"I'm sure it has, Canton. You may return to your normal duties for the rest of the day," Amelia knew only too well what this woman was like, and she was going to be having words with the duty officer for assigning Harry to her. Amelia had been busy up until now, not even seeing Harry at the end of the day with Lucy apparating into the Ministry to collect him, and she had therefore only discovered who he had been paired up with less than ten minutes ago. "This way, Trainee Potter."

Harry followed Amelia out, and then into a private elevator. "Where are we going, Ma'am?"

"I thought you might like a change of scenery," Amelia was too discreet to gossip about Canton to Harry, but from Harry's relieved look, she guessed that she was right. "This way." Amelia led the way out of the elevator and up a plain corridor which had a large black door at the end. "Behind this door is a room which will be a little disorientating at first until it recognizes my magical signature, and accepts your magical signature as well. Just keep hold of my hand, Harry."

Harry realized now that this was going to be one of the 'certain areas' that Amelia had mentioned at the start of his training. He therefore held out his hand, and it was duly taken by Amelia, who clasped it firmly, and then opened the door. The circular room didn't seem too bad at first to Harry. It had a floor that was polished so highly it almost looked like water, and he could see lots of doors, none of them seeming to possess handles. However all that changed when the door behind them closed, and the room began to spin, making Harry feel nauseous. Amelia called out. "Amelia Bones, Head of British Auror Division. Harry Potter, Temporary Trainee. Access Hall of Prophecies."

As she finished speaking, the room stopped spinning, the sick feeling that had possessed Harry vanished, and a door opened. "What's the Hall of Prophecies?"

"You'll see," Amelia kept hold of Harry, and took him through the door. "This, Harry, is the Hall of Prophecies."

By the light of hundreds of blue-flame candles, Harry could see towering shelves that seemed to stretch on forever. On the shelves were thousands of glass orbs. "What are they?"

"They are records of prophecies," Amelia started walking, still holding onto Harry's hand. "Don't try and touch one, you'll end up insane if you do."

Nervously Harry shoved his free hand in his pocket. "Why are we here?"

"I thought you might like to look around what most people don't get to see," Amelia walked along the floor skirting by the shelves. "All of these pertain to a prophecy that a seer has made."

"Is there any about anyone I know?" Harry asked with interest.

Amelia stopped and pointed. "Actually that one there relates to you."

Harry was released by Amelia and he looked closer, before swallowing hard. "And to him."

"Yes," Amelia nodded. "But according to some, it isn't supposed to be anything that you need to concern yourself with yet."

"Who said that?" Harry questioned.

"Albus - he doesn't think you're old enough to be burdened with what the prophecy says," Amelia stood staring at the innocuous looking globe.

"So why have you brought me here?" Harry trusted Albus' judgment, so he didn't understand why he was standing here now having this discussion.

"Because I disagree with him," Amelia said honestly. "I believe that forearmed is forewarned."

"And you think that I need to know about this prophecy about me and him?" Harry glanced at the orb on the shelf yet again.

Amelia nodded. "If you feel you are ready to know what it says."

Trusting Albus as he did, Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure I am."

"Then I can give you a choice, Harry," Amelia had hoped that Harry would say yes, for she truly believed he needed to know what the prophecy said, especially given what had happened at the end of his first year of school. "You can listen to the prophecy, or you can leave this room and when you feel you are ready I will bring you back, or you can wait until Albus deems you are ready."

Harry again looked back at the orb. "I really don't think I'm ready but I want to know. But what happens if I don't like what I hear?" Harry gave a shiver. "And I'm afraid I'll go mad wondering what it says if I don't listen to it."

Amelia knew that Harry truly wasn't ready to hear the prophecy, and that she should try again next year. So, to save Harry from worrying unduly, she aimed her wand at him. "Obliviate."

Harry shook his head as the room stopped spinning yet again. "Where are we going now?"

"This is the Death Chamber," Amelia decided that as she had shown Harry everything else, he may as well see the most restricted area of the Ministry. It was common knowledge that the Death Chamber existed, but few people were allowed inside. "Only Class 'A' Aurors and Unspeakables are allowed inside here, and, of course, any prisoners that were going to face the death penalty."

"But we don't have a death penalty," Harry pointed out.

"That's why I said 'were', and not 'are'. We used to have a death penalty for the crimes of severe violence, using the Unspeakable Curses, and murder," Amelia stood staring at the archway, a tattered curtain fluttering over its entrance. "And this is where the prisoners who had committed those crimes were brought to be executed."

"Unspeakable Curses?" Harry had never heard the term before. "What are they?"

"It's what the group of curses, including the Unforgivable Curses, were once known as," Amelia explained. "There were seven others. You've already learnt one: the Fiendfyre curse."

"Why would that be Unspeakable?" Harry was surprised he had learnt a curse once punishable by death.

"Because it's a curse that wreaks havoc, and is difficult to control," Amelia led Harry closer to the archway that sat at the top of a dais. "And people once used it to kill their enemies. This died out when it was made an Unspeakable Curse but eventually, like many other curses, it was reinstated as a normal curse, and eventually only the Unforgivable Curses remained punishable by death. But after two women were executed and found to have been innocent, even the death penalty was dropped."

Harry could not help but wonder how terrified the women must have been, and he stood staring at the archway. "What happens when a wizard or witch is pushed through there?"

"No-one knows," Amelia took Harry's hand again as he began to move forward to stop him. "But some people believe that it's a doorway to the afterlife."

"Is that why I can hear voices?" Harry asked.

"Voices?" Amelia looked down at Harry. "Coming from where?"

"Through there," Harry was glad Amelia was holding his hand again. He didn't know why but he had the insane urge to run into the archway. "Can't you hear them?"

"No," Harry would not be the first person to report the voices, something which Amelia herself had never experienced. Intrigued, Amelia had read all the reports on the archway, including some rather disturbing ones about Unspeakables and Aurors alike, throwing themselves into the archway after hearing the voices.

"I almost feel drawn towards them," Harry admitted.

"Then I think it's time we left," Amelia did not want to have to explain why the Boy Who Lived had leapt through the archway in the Death Chamber; a room he was not really supposed to have access to.

Harry gave the archway one final glance before exiting out, and finding himself back into the circular room. "Where to now?"

"I think somewhere a little less scary," Amelia smiled at Harry. "How about my office for a spot of lunch?"

Although he was somewhat reluctant to leave the area, and would have liked to back to the Death Chamber room, Harry dutifully followed Amelia out instead.

Harry subsequently spent most of the day with Amelia, and was introduced to the different heads of departments, and also to the Minister for Magic. Harry had not been impressed by the man, who had treated him like a five year old, offering him sweets and chocolate, and asking him if he had had a nice time playing at being an Auror. Harry had been even more disenchanted with the Senior Undersecretary, a rather ugly woman named Dolores Umbridge. She had looked at him kindly but Harry had sensed that she was just playing a part, and did not really like him. He had been glad when Amelia had said that they had better get on, and they had left.

Harry was to see Amelia again the next morning, when instead of going to the assignment room to meet up with Canton, Harry, together with all of the other first year trainees, were summoned to a small room where they found Amelia waiting for them.

Amelia dismissed the Auror who had escorted the trainees in, before beginning her address. "As you all probably know, I am Amelia Bones, Head of British Auror Division, and I always oversee this part of the training. Please sit down."

Everyone sat down, most of them a little nervous at dealing with the Head of Auror Division, and Amelia knew that. "Let's get the unpleasant part over with first."

Harry wondered what she was going on about, but he guessed from their worried looks that the trainees obviously knew what it was. Amelia continued speaking. "As you know, each and every one of your tutors, and this includes your mentor, has assessed you during this two week period. Accordingly, I have reviewed what they have to say," Amelia broke out into a big smile, "and I am pleased to announce that all of you have passed your induction period."

Happy murmurs and smiles were exchanged amongst the students. Amelia hadn't finished though. "Now that you've been accepted on the program as a full trainee, I will be using the Magus scale to

measure your magical levels." Worried looks began to appear again until Amelia continued. "These levels, however, will only be seen by me, and in no way will they influence your continuing in the program." Amelia could see relief amongst the group. "I'll start with Trainee Banks."

Before Marjorie could move, Harry put up his hand. "Excuse me, Ma'am but what is good on the Magus scale?"

"There is no good or bad, just levels of power, Trainee Potter," Amelia expected Harry to put down his hand, but he didn't. "Trainee Potter?"

Harry had no idea what Amelia meant by levels, so he asked. "What levels, Ma'am?"

Amelia set out what the levels were. "The Magus scale registers by numbers. A Muggle would register at zero; a squib at eighteen or below; an above-average Muggleborn usually registers at somewhere between one hundred and eighty, and two hundred; and an above-average pureblood at between one hundred and ninety, and two hundred and ten. Most wizards come in around the one hundred and fifty mark, regardless of their blood purity."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Harry could tell that some of the other Trainees were obviously grateful to hear this clarification as well.

Amelia beckoned to Marjorie again. "Auror Banks, if you please."

Marjorie stepped over to the scale, which was a large golden globe that she placed her hands on. A small golden square lit up in front of her telling her that she had scored exactly two hundred. A similar figure appeared on the square that was in front of Amelia, and she noted down Marjorie's test results before clearing the scale. "Trainee Dunn, you're next."

Dunn stepped onto the scale, and was a little disappointed by his reading of one hundred and seventy, but he didn't show this when he got off. Instead he was smiling as though he'd gone off the scale. One by one the trainees went through the motions until it was Harry's turn.

Before he placed his hands on the globe, Harry turned to Amelia. "What would be a normal reading for someone of my age, Ma'am?"

"Because your magic is not fully mature, and regardless of your blood purity, I would expect you to register at somewhere around one hundred and fifteen," Amelia estimated.

Harry hoped he wouldn't be lower than that, and put his hands on the globes just like the others had done. Nerves overcame him, and he closed his eyes.

Amelia smiled at the readout that had appeared, and then looked at Harry, who still had his eyes closed. "You can open your eyes now, Trainee Potter."

Harry opened his eyes to find the readout was much better than he'd expected. "Thank goodness!"

The class burst out laughing at Harry's apparent relief. Harry glanced over at Amelia, "Sorry, Ma'am, but I was really nervous."

"I could see that, Trainee Potter," Amelia was rather amused by Harry's expression. "Please rejoin your classmates."

Harry did so, and then was promptly dismissed. As they walked out, Marjorie fell into step with him. "So are you going to share, Harry?"

"One hundred and thirty-one," Harry beamed at Marjorie. "How about you?"

Marjorie grinned almost as widely as Harry. "Two hundred."

"Wow!" Harry was a little jealous. "I'll never be that powerful."

"I'm sure you will," Marjorie said confidently.

Harry shook his head. "I'm only just above average now."

"I'd say you were quite a bit above average, Harry," Marjorie refuted Harry's claim. "Madam Bones said that an average wizard rates at one hundred and fifty, and you weren't far below that. And you've got a lot of growing to do yet."

Harry still did not believe he would rank as high as Marjorie one day. "I still won't be as powerful as you."

"Ask Madam Bones to test you again next year," Marjorie suggested, not wanting Harry to get despondent over the difference in their power levels.

"I don't know if I'll be back or not," Harry admitted.

"I bet you will," Marjorie smiled at Harry as they headed into the room where they would meet up with their mentors. "See you again then, Harry."

Harry was hugged by Marjorie, who he would not see again before his training came to an end, and then he began to look around for Auror Canton. He was both surprised and pleased when a voice said, "Wotcher, Harry."

"Tonks!" Harry beamed. "Where's Auror Canton?"

"She's been reassigned," Tonks led Harry off.

"Oh," Harry wondered why. "Do you know why?"

"No," Tonks shook her head. "At least you have me now."

"I'm glad," Harry admitted. "She reminded me a little of Percy Weasley."

Tonks snorted out a laugh. "She does, doesn't she? But don't tell anyone I agreed with you."

"You know I won't," Harry smiled at the girl he considered a big sister. "What are we doing today?"

"A quick scan of the foyer, and then out onto Diagon Alley," Tonks led Harry out to the main foyer.

On entering the foyer, Harry glanced around in shock. There had to be at least two hundred witches and wizards in the area. "Why are there so many people here?"

"That's what I'm about to find out," Tonks raised her voice. "Aurors coming through. Clear the way."

Even with the authority she possessed, Tonks found it difficult to make her way through the crowd, which mostly seemed to be made up of women. When she reached the front of the melee, she discovered the reason for it. "Mr. Lockhart, I need you to move along."

"It's Professor Lockhart, dear girl," Gilderoy stopped signing a smiling picture of himself, and pulled out a certificate that authenticated his new title and position.

"Professor Lockhart," Tonks said in a firm voice. "I still need you to move along. You are blocking a public right of passage."

"Mitchell Cosgrove, Daily Prophet, can I just get a picture of you and one of our finest?" A tall, greasy-haired man asked, having shouldered his way through the crowd, using his large camera as a barrier.

"No, you may not," Tonks snapped. She was about to touch her wand to her throat to tell everyone to move along when Lockhart spied her companion.

"Well, I never," Gilderoy stepped over to Harry. "It's Harry Potter."

Mitchell Cosgrove knew a photo opportunity when he saw one. "Get a little closer."

Gilderoy didn't need telling twice, and immediately put a firm arm around Harry's shoulder pulling him tightly against his side. "Smile, Harry."

Harry blinked rapidly as a blinding light made him unable to see for a moment, and then a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him away from the pink-clad Professor. "Harry, are you alright?"

Harry recognized the voice of Amelia Bones, and after blinking several more times, he was able to see her properly. "Yes, thank you, Ma'am."

"Madam Bones," a skinny vulture-like woman asked, "is it true that Harry Potter has joined British Auror Division?"

Amelia would have normally said 'no comment' but in Harry's case this would have caused more trouble for the boy than it was worth. "No, it is not." She put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Mr. Potter has merely been given an opportunity to experience what it is like to begin Auror training."

"Is this special treatment for the Boy Who Lived, or is it open to anyone?" Rita Skeeter, the reporter asked, her quill poised ready to take down Amelia's answer.

Amelia hadn't planned to reveal her idea yet, but she was now forced to. "Mr. Potter's successful experience will open the doors to six students per year to sit in for a fortnight at the start of first year training."

"And what do they have to do to get in?" Rita pressed, realizing that this was a good story, and she intended to get the exclusive on it.

"They have to be academically successful, have a bona fide interest in becoming an Auror, and they will have to be at least a fifth year at Hogwarts," Amelia set out what she had decided.

"So Harry Potter isn't really eligible to be here, is he?" Rita asked in a sly voice.

"Mr. Potter is one of the brightest students in his year, and he made the request directly to me," Amelia lied; she wasn't going to say that Susan had asked. "After reviewing his school record, and already having the student program in mind, I decided that it would be an opportunity to test how someone even younger than those I'm willing to accept would deal with the course. If Mr. Potter could complete the two week trial successfully, then I was certain that fifth years and above would be able to."

"So the fact that Harry is good friends with your daughter has nothing to do with it?" Rita questioned the woman.

"Not at all," Amelia turned to face the crowd, who'd almost forgotten about Lockhart in the excitement of seeing the Boy Who Lived in person. "And if anyone else other than Mr. Potter had asked, they

would have received exactly the same scrutiny and consideration that he did."

Gilderoy had gotten fed up with no longer being the center of attention, and he shifted so that he was standing next to Harry again. "Well, I for one, as a Professor, think that it is a most excellent idea."

"Why, thank you, Gilderoy," Amelia's tone was somewhat frosty. "Now that I have your seal of approval, perhaps we can move things along."

Harry found himself being led away by Amelia, while Tonks and several other Aurors, who'd joined her, began to disperse the crowd. Only once they were in Amelia's office, did Harry ask a question. "Who was that woman?"

"Rita Skeeter," Amelia's tone again indicated how she felt about the woman. "She's a nasty gossip, and has a tendency to twist things around to suit her. Be warned, Harry. You may not like what she writes about you."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"You'll see," Amelia didn't have time to tell him. "Harry, I'm sorry but I'm due in a meeting. Wait here, I should be back shortly. I'll send Daniel in to check on you."

Harry found that Amelia was as good as her word, and Daniel, a tall black haired young man, had provided Harry with not only beverages and a snack, but books and magazines to read while he waited. He didn't have to wait long though, for Amelia was back within an hour. "I'm sorry about that, Harry."

"I wasn't supposed to be here, anyway," Harry reminded Amelia. "I should have been out with Tonks."

"After this morning, I decided you were better off away from the newspaper hounds," Amelia knew that Skeeter would not have left if Harry had remained in the vicinity.

Harry wasn't that interested in the reporter, but he was interested in the possibility of returning. His face red, and his voice a little hesitant, Harry made a request. "Amelia, is there any chance I can come

back again next year? You sort of said that I'd done well to that reporter, and so I was hoping.."

Amelia picked up a packet that was in her in-tray. "Let me just read this, and I'll answer you."

Harry waited patiently, wondering what was in the packet. He soon found out, when Amelia laid the packet down. "None of the tutors had handed in a report on you, but I asked them to do so last night so that I could decide on whether the program was going to be a viable option or not," Amelia revealed.

Harry was a little surprised. "But you told that Skeeter woman that I'd been successful."

"I wasn't going to tell her that I had no idea what your tutors thought about you," Amelia wasn't surprised though by Harry asking. "And you'll be pleased to hear that they all had nothing but good things to say about you, Harry, especially Auror Valeris."

"I really liked her," Harry went red, having developed a bit of a crush on the Auror.

Amelia kept her smile under control. "She's a very capable Auror, Harry, and I'm glad that you liked her." She now had a decision to make, and she fell silent while she debated Harry's earlier request. "In the light of your outstanding performance, I'm willing to allow you to return for one week each year, up until fifth year, when you will have to apply like everybody else."

Harry's face lit up. "Thank you."

"You might not be saying that when you've finished the week," Amelia knew that Harry expected to go over what he'd already learnt. "Next year, I'll allow you to join the program during the third week. You'll be learning some things that they don't teach at Hogwarts."

Harry's face became even brighter. "That's wonderful."

"I'm glad you think so," Amelia looked at her watch. "I'm going to turn you over to Arthur Weasley now. I'll collect you at six, and we'll go home, fetch Susan and Lucy, and we can all go out to dinner."

"Thank you, Amelia," Harry got to his feet. "I've really enjoyed the last two weeks."

"I'm glad to hear it, Harry," Amelia sealed the packet containing Harry's assessment back up. "Come on, I'll take you to see Arthur."

Harry's head shot up when Amelia came walking into Arthur's office at four. "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

Arthur echoed Harry's words, before asking after Amelia. "Is everything alright?"

Amelia shook her head. "I have to attend an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot, and won't be able to take Harry out to dinner tonight."

"I can take him home with me," Arthur offered. "He's supposed to be coming to us anyway tomorrow, so one day sooner won't hurt."

"That would be perfect," Amelia turned to Harry and held out her hand. "It's been a pleasure, Harry."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Harry found himself wondering about his clothing.

"I'll arrange for your things to be sent over to Arthur's home," Amelia put Harry's concerns to bed. "And I'll tell Susan that you'll see her on the Express."

"Thank you for the opportunity you've given me, and for letting me stay with you. Can you also thank Lucy for taking care of me?" Harry was sorry he would not see Lucy again. He and the redhead had gotten along very well, and she had also taught Harry a few more spells that were not defense related.

"I'll do that," Amelia smiled at Harry before hurrying off.

Next Chapter: Severus tries to plant the diary on Harry one last time; Harry's quidditch trial doesn't go to plan.

Note: I'm not sure when I will update next. I will try and post at the end of next week but real life is interfering with my writing at the moment.

Chapter 24: Quidditch Vice Captain

Harry was about to board the train when a voice calling his name stopped him. Harry turned around. "Yes, Professor?"

"I believe you dropped this," Severus held out a small black book.

Harry looked closely at it but didn't reach out and take it. "I don't think so, Sir. It's got someone else's name on it." Harry pointed at the lettering on the book. "T.M. Riddle. Perhaps it belongs to a first year, Sir."

Severus' attempt to deposit the diary openly had failed. He therefore slipped it into his cloak before responding brusquely. "You should hurry up and board. You don't want to be late, Potter."

Harry didn't need telling twice. He hurriedly climbed onboard, glad to be free of Severus' scrutiny. Susan patted the seat next to her. "I saved you a spot."

"I'm going to find Meredith. See you all later," Ginny left the carriage in search of her best friend in Hufflepuff, meaning she missed Harry's speech about the diary Snape had tried to plant on him.

Harry flopped down next to Susan. "Snape just tried to give me a book that didn't even belong to me."

"What do you mean?" Hermione kept glancing at the corridor as she asked.

"It had someone else's name on it, Riddle or something, and Snape still thought it was mine," Harry explained. "You think he'd have noticed that; he notices everything else."

"Probably just couldn't be bothered to find its proper owner," Hermione decided, her face brightening when the carriage door slid open and George and Fred appeared. "Hi."

George sat down next to Hermione. "Did you enjoy the rest of your summer?"

Fred snorted, sounding a lot like Ginny. "You should know that already. You wrote to each other practically every day!" Fred began to blow kisses in the air.

"Stop it, Fred!" George snapped as he got to his feet. He then addressed Hermione. "Do you want to find somewhere else to sit rather than sitting with this idiot?"

Despite being aware that it was his teasing that had caused George's reaction, Fred experienced more than a little hurt, since George usually always sat with him. "It's okay. You stay here with your girlfriend. I'll go and sit with Lee."

"I think he was upset," Hermione observed when Fred stomped off.

"Tough. He's been giving me stick about you all summer," George put his arm around Hermione.

"But I thought he had a girlfriend," Hermione remarked.

"He does but she only wrote to him once a week," George revealed. "I think he was a little put out."

"I wrote to Harry every day and he wrote back almost as often," Susan announced, before realizing how her comments might be construed. "But only because we're friends." She grinned at Hermione and George. "Not like you two."

Hermione knew she shouldn't have been, but deep down she found she was glad to hear Susan say that she and Harry were only friends. Suddenly she realized that Susan was still talking to her. "Sorry, what did you say?"

Susan repeated her question. "After everything they said about not wanting you to stay at George's house, what did your Mum and Dad say when they found out that you were actually going out with him?"

"They weren't happy about it," Hermione had had several heated discussions with her parents over the subject, her father being the most objectionable. "But they couldn't really say much without running Professor McGonagall down, and so they let the subject drop. But Daddy sent George a very long letter warning him about the consequences if he ever lays a finger on me."

George had kept quiet about the letter at home, not wanting to get even more stick from Fred. "If I do, apparently I'm going to find out what it's like to have my teeth extracted without anesthesia!"

Everyone knew what that was since Hermione had described more than once in gruesome detail what went on in her parents' office, and both Susan and Luna shivered at the idea. Harry simply grinned. "Looks as though you had better keep your hands to yourself, George."

It was only after he spoke that Harry remembered covering Hermione's body with his own when he was kissing her, and he went red. Harry had no idea that Hermione was thinking about the same thing, and also blushing, she steered the discussion towards what she termed "other more interesting topics" such as quidditch.

George was a little surprised given that Hermione was not exactly fond of the sport, but he happily went along with the change, thinking that maybe his girlfriend had done it for him. After talking that subject into submission, the conversation turned to what additional subjects the third years were taking, and most exciting of all for them (except for poor Luna), the trips into Hogsmeade.

When they had reached the subject of their electives, Harry went first in listing what he was taking. "I'm taking Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

It turned out that Justin was taking the same; when he'd discussed his choices with his parents, his father had dismissed everything else as a waste of time. Susan, however, had opted for Divination and Muggle Studies.

Hermione surprised everyone with her choice of courses. "I'm taking everything."

"You won't have enough time in the day to take everything," Luna pointed out.

"Professor McGonagall is going to arrange something for me," Hermione didn't say what the 'something' was though.

"I wouldn't want extra tutoring," George shuddered, automatically presuming that additional tutoring was the 'something' that Minerva was organizing. He had no idea that it was far more interesting than that, and that it would eventually play a part in his and Hermione's relationship falling apart.

"Neither would I," Justin grimaced. "I had enough of that when I was at prep school."

"I can drop a subject if it gets too much," Hermione revealed some of the conversation she had had with Minerva. "But even so, my timetable will still be rather full."

"So when will I get to see you?" George asked in a slightly despondent voice.

"Don't worry," Hermione squeezed his hand. "I'll make time."

Seeing Hermione and George together made Susan wish that she could be sitting like that with Harry. She had hoped that Harry would ask her out when he had stayed with her, but although he had been friendly and affectionate, he had made no such move. Deciding that she was going to take a chance, Susan stood up and made a request of Harry, "Harry, do you want to come with me to find the trolley witch?"

"I could do with some chocolate," Harry got to his feet, and followed Susan out of the carriage.

George turned to the rest of the children in the carriage. "What do you want to bet that by the time they come back, they're going out?"

The other three refused to take the bet, and Hermione climbed to her feet and closed the door. Not wanting to think about Harry and Susan getting together, nor why it should be bothering her so much, she changed the subject to schoolwork. "So how are you planning to study for your OWLs, George?"

George groaned inside but dutifully began to get out his homework timetable that he'd filled in after Hermione had sent it to him during the summer.

Unaware that their relationship had come up for gambling upon, Harry and Susan weaved their way down the swaying train. When they reached an area that was clear, Susan stopped, and turned back to Harry, her words tumbling out in quick succession before anyone could come along, "Harry, I have something to ask you but you can say no if you want, and it won't matter."

Harry was a little taken aback at Susan's nervous proclamation. "What is it?"

"Will you be my boyfriend?" Susan blurted out the request before she could chicken out. After Harry had left, Susan had talked out what she wanted to do with Lucy, who had said that if Susan liked Harry so much, she should ask him out.

Harry was totally stunned at first and said nothing. Then he finally asked in a bewildered voice, "You want to go out with me?"

Embarrassed and believing that Harry was going to refuse her, Susan went to turn away. "Forget about it." Lucy had also warned Susan to be prepared to be disappointed, and now Susan knew why. "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter. I..."

"Wait," Harry grabbed Susan's arm. "I'm not saying no. I just didn't expect you to ask me."

Susan felt a little bolstered by the fact that Harry had not turned her down outright. "So will you go out with me?"

Harry was struggling for the right answer, and it showed in both his hesitant response, and on his face. "I..."

Susan could not help but feel upset and rejected. "Forget about it, Harry."

"Yes," Harry spat out on seeing the hurt look on the girl's face. "I'll go out with you."

Susan's face lit up, and she smiled shyly at Harry. Harry now had no idea what he was supposed to do, but it soon became clear that Susan did. When she stepped closer to Harry, he finally realized that she expected him to kiss her. His heart seeming as if it was in his

mouth, Harry therefore did as he was expected to, and pressed his lips against Susan's.

When they separated, Susan was looking happy, and Harry was looking stunned. Susan beamed happily at Harry. "Shall we go and find the witch then?"

"Of course," Harry followed Susan, but his mind was far from what the trolley witch was selling. Instead it was filled with tumultuous thoughts about his first kiss with Susan and how it compared to the one he had shared with Hermione; that kiss had made his lips tingle, his heart pound, and his legs feel weak. The one he had shared with Susan had done none of those things, and had simply been nice.

As he waited for Susan to pick what she wanted from the trolley witch, Harry began to wonder if he should have listened to his inner voice - the one that had told him to say 'no', and had made him initially hesitate when responding to Susan. But Susan had looked so upset, and Harry did like her, so he had said yes instead. It was only when he had kissed her that he remembered what he and Tonks had discussed, and Harry realized that he had made a mistake. But it was too late now; he could hardly change his mind without upsetting Susan, or without explaining his reasons for backing out.

As they walked slowly back towards the carriage, Susan slipped her hand into Harry's, and liking the feeling of holding hands with a girl, Harry began to feel a little more positive about going out with Susan. When she smiled prettily at him, he again remembered why he had contemplated asking Susan out before talking to Tonks. And by the time he reached the carriage, a deluded Harry had come to the conclusion that maybe the reason the kiss he had shared with Hermione had been so wonderful was because that kiss had been stolen, that perhaps Tonks had been wrong, and that maybe kissing Susan would get better.

Harry had no idea that it would not. Nor did he know that the kiss he had shared with Hermione, as innocent and sweet as it was, was the one with which he would compare all future kisses. And he also had no idea that his decision to say yes to Susan would inadvertently cause him a great deal of trouble later that year.

Once in Hogwarts, the six children all split up, moving to their own house tables. Harry winced when Susan grabbed his hand, although this time it wasn't gentle as it had been on the Express, and instead it bordered on painful. "What is it?"

Susan's face became a portrait of adoration. "Look, it's Gilderoy Lockhart. He's here at last."

Harry rolled his eyes, remembering his first encounter with the effeminate teacher. "Oh joy!"

"You're just jealous because all the girls have stopped looking at you," Susan responded, and let go of Harry's hand to drop her head into her hands to stare dreamily at the coifed teacher.

"I can promise you that I'm not jealous of him," Harry met Justin's eyes, who put two fingers in his mouth imitating a gagging effect.

"It's alright, Harry," Susan lifted up her head and kissed Harry's cheek. "I still prefer you."

"Ten points from Hufflepuff for such a disgusting public and inappropriate display," Severus interrupted Susan's kiss.

Harry couldn't stop the scowl that settled on his features, and Severus remarked on that as well. "Problem, Potter?"

"No, Sir," Harry ground out.

"Keep it that way," Severus continued on his way to the head table.

Susan found herself almost in tears. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean for us to lose points."

Harry started to fish in his pocket for a handkerchief for Susan – Harry's aunt had ground it into him that he should always carry one – but he was beaten to the mark by Gilderoy Lockhart who, with Snape blocking their view, neither of them had noticed getting up from the table. "For you, dear child. I saw your tears when I was on my way over to say hello again to Harry here."

Susan's tears instantly dried up, and she clutched the lilac embroidered handkerchief to her breast. "Thank you, Professor Lockhart."

"So you already know that I'm going to be teaching here?" Gilderoy was a little disappointed. "Did Harry spill the beans?" Gilderoy had expected a mention in the Daily Prophet after his trip to the Ministry but instead the newspaper had been full of Amelia's plans and Harry's part in them.

"No, I didn't. Professor Dumbledore told us last year you would be taking up the DADA Professor's position, and you're sitting on the head table," Harry got in before Susan could respond. "He also said that you couldn't start last year because you were on a book tour."

Gilderoy missed the sarcasm dripping from Harry's every word. "I was promoting Magical Me, my autobiography. Big seller, you know. But I'd be happy to let you and your pretty girlfriend have a signed copy."

As Harry hurriedly shook his head and said "no thank you", Susan gave a happy squeal. "I'd love a signed copy, Professor. I've read everything else you've written, and of course I already own Magical Me, but it isn't signed."

"Then a signed copy shall be yours," Gilderoy flounced off, leaving behind a delighted Susan and a disgusted Harry.

On the head table, Minerva watched Gilderoy moving among the pupils. "He's supposed to be up here."

"I'm sure he'll return shortly," Albus, however, was beginning to wonder what he'd been thinking when he had signed the man up. It almost looked to him as though he had another Slughorn on his hands, and Gilderoy was trying to "collect" his students.

Gilderoy did eventually rejoin his colleagues, as only then could the first years be brought in and sorted. Albus noted during the sorting that Gilderoy listened carefully as the name of each child was called, no doubt hoping that some of them had famous parents he could network with. Albus had no idea that Gilderoy's interest was far more nefarious than mere networking, and his interest lay in possible new sources of material for his next book.

Harry too could not help but take heed of the new arrivals for, sitting at the Hufflepuff table, Harry found himself being stared at by some of them. Only after checking out the wizarding world's most famous individual, did those in the know turn their attention to the other famous occupant of the Great Hall. Susan saw Harry's frown, and this time she correctly interpreted his annoyance. She therefore squeezed his hand sympathetically under the table, and whispered to him, "Don't worry it will only last for a short time, and then it will stop."

Sitting opposite them, Ginny flinched at the sappy look that Susan gave Harry. She also heard Susan's not so quiet whisper, and added an observation of her own, "Not if Dennis Creevey turns out to be as bad as his brother, it won't!"

"Don't even go there," Harry scowled when he thought about the Gryffindor who had followed him around like a puppy dog for the better part of the previous year, trying to get photos of Harry until Fred had sent him off with a flea in his ear.

Ginny glanced over at the Gryffindor table. "Take a look, Harry."

Harry followed Ginny's line of sight to where Colin was pointing in his direction, no doubt telling his younger brother, who had just been sorted into Gryffindor, exactly who Harry was, and where he was sitting. He groaned softly, "So it looks as though I'll be hiding from both of them this year then."

All talk ended when the Headmaster stood up, and began to introduce the teachers.

One Week Later

Harry rubbed his head. "I wish I could shift this headache."

"I thought you went to Madam Pomfrey," Justin thought Harry was starting to look a little pale.

"I did go to see her and it went away for a while, but it seems to have come back," Harry shivered.

Ginny placed a hand on Harry's head. "You feel awfully warm."

Harry picked up his broomstick and shivered again. "Perhaps the rain will help cool me down."

"Perhaps you should sit this out," Justin suggested, not entirely sure that playing in the light rain that was falling would be such a good idea. "Or ask Cedric to postpone it."

"I'll be okay," Harry smiled a little wanly. "Let's go."

Justin was already carrying the broomstick his mother had bought for him, and Ginny picked up the one that she had chosen from the school shed. Unlike Harry and Justin, she was trying out for chaser. Having seen both boys fly, she was aware that they would likely beat her in the trial, particularly Harry, so she had decided to challenge herself and try for a different position.

By the time the trio had arrived at the pitch the light rain had abated. And since the seeker was the first position to be decided that year, Harry and Justin immediately took to the air, Harry wishing that the rain would start up again to help cool him down. Once he was hovering about the stadium, a shivering Harry had to shake his head to try and clear the constant ringing that was going on in his ears. Determined to recover from the malady that threatened to overwhelm him, Harry shot after the first snitch he saw, his fingers wrapping around it, and he placed it in his pocket. Just as he zipped up his pocket, a wave of nausea washed over him, and Harry was forced to lean over his broomstick, and unable to stop himself, he vomited onto the ground below. Luckily there was no-one below him.

In the stands, Susan grabbed Hermione's arm. "Harry's been sick."

"I can see that," Hermione loosened Susan's death grip. "It's probably just nerves." But even she had to admit to herself that she was worried; Harry had looked almost green when he had walked onto the pitch.

Harry's first bout of nausea was followed by a second and third but he still plodded valiantly on. He had just caught his second snitch when his world began to spin, and he murmured softly to himself, "This isn't good." Then his world went black.

Susan and Hermione both screamed when they saw Harry losing his grip on his broomstick. "Harry!"

Both Justin and Cedric Diggory had already spotted Harry's predicament, and were heading in his direction. However, it was Cedric who reached Harry just in time to stop him plummeting to the ground, sliding an arm around the now unconscious boy, and helping to maneuver him to safety, calling out to those sitting below, "His body feels like a furnace."

As soon as Cedric lowered Harry to the ground, Ron, who had been watching close to the edge of the pitch with Ginny, placed a hand on Harry's forehead. "You're right. He's burning up."

Susan, Hermione, and Luna, who had had her head buried in the Quibbler when Harry had started to collapse, all finally reached the huddle, Susan dropping to her knees in the wet grass. "Harry?"

"He's out cold," Cedric pulled her back. "I'm going to take him to the medical wing. Weasley, can you give me a hand? The rest of you can stay here. Justin, can you monitor the goalkeeper trials just until I get back?"

The two boys looped their arms around Harry's back, and headed towards the school, all three girls trailing behind them. Justin turned to Ginny. "You're not going with them?"

"You need chasers for the goalkeeper trials, and that's the position I'm trying for," Ginny picked up Harry's broomstick. "You might want to put this somewhere safe."

"You should use it, I'm sure Harry wouldn't mind," Justin had seen Ginny fly when they'd all stayed with Harry, and he had been more than a little impressed at the young girl's prowess on a mediocre broom.

Ginny looked hopefully at Justin. "Do you really think Harry wouldn't mind?"

Justin knew Harry well enough by now to be able to comment on his friend's reaction. "Of course he wouldn't."

Ginny's face split into a delighted grin. "Thanks, Justin."

"You deserve a fair chance," Justin then turned his attention away from Ginny, and began to bark out orders, before he picked up the clipboard that Cedric had lain out on the bench, and started to make notes as he watched the players, tickled pink that Cedric had trusted him enough to do this.

Cedric returned after a short while but after glancing at Justin's meticulous notes, he told him to continue. "Don't let me stop you."

Only once the goalkeeper trials ended, did Justin have a chance to question Cedric. "How's Harry?"

"Madam Pomfrey thinks he's got a form of dragon flu," Cedric hadn't stayed long enough though to get a confirmation on Harry's condition. "She also said that you can see him when you've finished here."

After passing on news of Harry, Cedric yelled to the players milling around. "Right, it's time for the chasers and beaters to get up there together." He glanced at Justin. "You can continue to take notes if you'd like."

Justin heartily agreed to do so, and focused his attention on what was going on. Afterwards, Cedric took his arm and led him to the side. "Your notes match my thoughts almost perfectly. I'd have to get it passed by Professor Sprout but if you make the team, would you like to be the vice-captain?"

"Vice-captain?" Justin repeated. "But there's no such position."

"There will be as from this year," Cedric informed him. "It's in case the Captain is ever injured or falls sick."

"And you want me?" Justin could feel his entire body shaking with excitement and nerves.

"I'd planned on asking Juliette but you've just shown me that you're on the same page as I am, and I think we'll work well together," Cedric held out his hand. "So are you in if you make the team?"

Justin grabbed the proffered limb. "Yes, thank you."

"Okay, we need to re-run the seeker trial again, so go tell all those who might be interested now that Harry is out of the picture to get on their broomsticks," Cedric took the clipboard back from Justin, and placed it on the bench. "And that of course includes you and me. We don't need to take notes for this one."

Justin was about to grab his broomstick when Cedric's comment about his friend finally filtered into his brain. "Harry is out of the picture?"

"If it is dragon flu, Harry is going to be out of a lot of things for quite some time," Cedric knew that Harry would be disappointed but he had a duty to ensure that the next best person took Harry's place. "But I know he caught two snitches before he collapsed, and I'll make a note of that."

"Thanks," Justin did the math, quickly realizing that Harry's snitch catching total was likely not going to be enough to even make reserve, but there was nothing he could do about it, and so he headed off to get on his broomstick.

Twenty minutes later it was all over. Ginny, who had decided to try out after all because Harry had collapsed, had caught one snitch, Justin had three, and Cedric himself had caught four. Cedric called his opponents over. "Well done. The results will be posted tonight. Justin, I will tell you that you've made the team as reserve. Are you free now?"

A delighted Justin nodded. "Let me just give my broom to Ginny."

The two boys then headed for Pomona Sprout's office, Cedric knocking politely, even though the door was wide open. "Professor Sprout, can I have a word?"

"Of course, Cedric," Pomona got up, and closed the door behind the group. "Would you like some milk and biscuits?"

"Thanks," Cedric loved spending time with his head of house, and he would be spending even more time with her now that he had been made a prefect. "It's about the vice-captain's spot. Justin has just made reserve seeker, and I would like him to fill the VC's position. He's made some excellent notes."

Pomona took the notes that Justin had made, and she skimmed over them, asking Justin a question as she read, "So, Justin, tell me who would you appoint for each position?"

Justin's palms began to sweat under the scrutiny of his head of house, but he stuck to his convictions. "Goalkeeper: Huston, Reserve: Matthews; Seeker: Diggory, Reserve: myself; Chasers: Weasley, Cadwallader, and Groves, Reserve: Smith; Beaters: Seaton and Ollis, Reserve: Lock."

"What happened to Harry?" Pomona questioned the omission of her star player.

Cedric explained what had happened. "So I'm afraid Harry won't be making the team."

Pomona was disappointed but she was also aware that Cedric was a good flyer, and would do his best to fill Harry's shoes. "Thank you for telling me. Now what is your opinion of Justin's choices?"

"I would have gone the same way except for one of the beaters. I'd use Lock and put Seaton in reserve," Cedric announced.

"Then that is the team we'll go with," Pomona gave Justin a smile that was overflowing with pride. "Justin, you will be vice-captain. And if all goes to plan, you'll take over from Cedric when he leaves in three years' time."

Justin's eyes grew wide. "Take over?"

Cedric realized that Justin was truly shocked. "Yes. As vice captain, when I leave you will become my replacement."

"Me become Captain?" Justin squeaked, his voice still full of the amazement he was feeling. "I can't believe it."

Pomona smiled at the younger boy. "Justin, you should believe it."

"But I thought that someone like Harry..." Justin stopped speaking when his head of house held up her hand.

Pomona was not surprised by Justin's thoughts. "Harry is an excellent seeker but that does not necessarily mean he would be a

good captain. After reviewing your notes, I believe you would. The notes you made are methodical, you get along with everyone from what I've seen, and Cedric obviously thinks you're a good enough quidditch player."

"He has the potential to be a great quidditch player," Cedric corrected Pomona's comment.

"Thank you," Justin's voice was shaking.

Pomona reached into her desk and pulled out a cloth badge. "This is for you to have placed on your quidditch shirt."

"Thanks, Professor," Justin reverently took the badge.

"You can head off now," Pomona had a few things she wanted to talk to Cedric about that were not quidditch related. "I'm sure you want to check in on Harry. Please give him my regards."

"I will, Professor, and thank you both again," Justin was aware that he was being overly effusive, but he couldn't help himself.

"You've earned it," Pomona smiled yet again. "Now run along."

Justin did exactly that, and when he reached the hospital wing he went in search of his friend, only to discover that Harry had been quarantined by Madam Pomfrey. "How long will he be in quarantine?"

"At least two weeks," Poppy Pomfrey noticed the vice-captain's badge that was still being clutched by Justin. "Congratulations, Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Justin wondered when he'd stop saying the words 'thank you'. "Can I see Harry at all?"

Poppy was aware that Justin probably wanted to tell Harry about the quidditch trial, although she doubted Harry would be saying anything for a while. "Before you do, I need to check you to see if you have any symptoms of dragon flu yourself."

Justin gripped his badge tighter, alarm filling him at the thought that his chances of becoming captain one day might all come to a premature end. "But I don't feel ill."

"Maybe not, but you have been in constant contact with Harry," Poppy reminded him as she waved her wand over him. "You're clean. I'll just use a charm on you so that you don't breathe the same air as your friends. But only five minutes, mind you."

Justin then had his first experience with the bubble-head charm, and he was allowed into what he thought was a side room. He was more than a little surprised to find that the room had ten beds in it, and that not only was Harry in there, but so were Susan, Hermione and George. "You're all sick?"

"No," Hermione shook her head. "But we're all showing minor symptoms of the dragon flu."

"Why did it take so long to come out?" Justin sat down in a chair. "I mean it's been weeks since Harry was in contact with any dragons."

George explained what the matron had told him. "Madam Pomfrey said that it incubates for several weeks or sometimes longer, and then becomes full blown dragon flu. The whole school is going to have to be tested. They're announcing it in a few minutes' time at lunch."

"So the hospital wing could become very busy," Justin was relieved he had tested clean. "Was Luna clean?"

"Yes," Hermione nodded her head. "As were Fred and Ginny."

Justin walked over to Harry, whose bed was surrounded by an opaque bubble, which was helping him breathe. "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes but they were unfocussed and quickly closed again. "How long before he wakes up properly?"

"Madam Pomfrey said he will probably be like this for at least two days," Susan's voice was full of worry. "And it will be at least two weeks before he leaves here, and it could be a few months before he's fully recovered."

"Wow," Justin used one of Harry's favorite words.

"How did the trials go?" George knew that he was a shoe-in to make the Gryffindor team again, and he was hoping that his infection didn't turn into a full blown episode.

"I'm reserve seeker," Justin announced proudly, and held up his badge. "And vice captain."

"Vice captain?" George questioned.

Justin explained what he had been told. "I suppose they'll announce it to each team as the trials start."

"Harry's not going to make the Hufflepuff team, is he?" George's voice carried the pity he was feeling for his unconscious friend.

Justin slowly shook his head. "Fraid not."

"Poor Harry," Susan knew that despite Harry's initial reticence, he'd grown to love the game.

"Is Diggory seeker?" George knew how much the boy wanted the spot.

"Yes," Justin clarified George's guess, before rising to his feet as the bubble around his head began to shrink. "I'd better go. Madam Pomfrey said I could only have five minutes."

"Can you arrange for someone to get my homework to me?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"I'll do the same for all of you," Justin promised. "See you when I can."

As it turned out, no-one else in school had contracted dragon flu, much to Madam Pomfrey's relief. And when George and Susan showed no signs of getting any worse, they were also released. Unfortunately for Hermione, her infection mutated, and she ended up in a condition similar to Harry's.

Harry coughed loudly. "Ouch, I wish my head would stop aching."

"I wish you'd shut up," Hermione didn't mean to bitch but she felt awful; she'd even ignored her homework.

Harry understood exactly how Hermione felt, and so didn't take offense. "Sorry."

"I'm sorry too," Hermione was grateful that Harry had lowered his voice. "Why do you suppose we got it the worst?"

"Madam Pomfrey said that I might have got it that time when I spent a week with Charlie, and that it didn't come out until now," Harry coughed painfully, holding his head as he did so.

Even though she didn't really want to bring it up, Hermione felt it was necessary. "That was just before you kissed me, wasn't it?"

Harry found himself apologizing yet again for his minor indiscretion. "I'm really, really sorry if I caused you to get the dragon flu."

Hermione waved off Harry's apology. "Harry, it's okay. You had no idea that something like this would happen, and I know you really didn't mean for the kiss to happen."

Lying in bed across from Hermione, Harry had spent a lot of time reviewing how he had felt when he had kissed her, and had had to admit to himself that he had intended for the kiss to happen, even if he had not really realized at the time. However, he could hardly say this to Hermione. "Thanks for understanding."

Hermione coughed and clutched her head again. "Okay, now shut up."

Harry called out softly. "Barnes."

A house-elf, who was immune to dragon flu, and was acting as a go-between for when the children needed something, appeared. "Yes, Mister Harry?"

"Can you please ask Madam Pomfrey if Hermione can have something for her head?" Harry asked politely. "And me as well if I could."

"Yes, Mister Harry," the house-elf responded and disappeared.

Hermione smiled gratefully at Harry, "Thanks."

"No bother," Harry glanced over as the door opened and Madam Pomfrey came in. "Can we have anything?"

"Yes, you can, Harry," Poppy held out vials to each child. "Because neither of you has been sleeping well, I have also included a mild sedative."

Not really wanting to go to sleep but having little choice in the matter, Harry took his potion, and before the nurse had left, his eyes began to close, and the world faded away.

Next Chapter: Ginny takes possession of a new book; Harry has a run-in with Malfoy; Justin reveals the girl he likes.

Chapter 25: A Diary Bound Friend

October 7, 1993

Ginny was miserable. She had hoped against hope that Harry would return her feelings, that he would go off Susan, or that he would realize that she, Ginny, was his perfect partner. Instead it appeared that he'd done none of those things. And, since his release from the hospital wing three weeks earlier, Harry seemed to be spending even more time with Susan than before.

Ginny swore softly under her breath when a snapping sound followed by several loud thuds told her that the handle on her bag had broken, sending her books crashing to the ground. Ginny was now even more upset; the bag had been Charlie's, and he had given it to her in lieu of the gloves that he had given to Harry. Turning around, she was shocked to find Professor Snape scooping up her books. "Allow me, Miss Weasley."

"Th... thank you, Sir," Ginny nervously took her books back.

"You're welcome, Miss Weasley," Severus gave a rare smile, and he slipped away, his smile changing from pleasant to triumphant. "You're so very welcome."

Ginny continued on her way to the library. Spotting Harry and the others, she changed her mind about studying there, and started heading back to Hufflepuff. She stopped when she saw Meredith Harker, her best friend, coming towards her. "Gin, I thought we were studying in the library."

"Too full," Ginny lied. "I'm going back to Hufflepuff."

Meredith didn't suspect Ginny's deception, and she simply followed her friend. Walking along, Ginny silently fumed about Harry and Susan, blaming them quite unfairly for her bag breaking. She had to admit that she had been more than a little surprised by Professor Snape's help, and she wondered whether his help signified a change in his behavior towards her.

"Gin? Hello?" Meredith had stopped walking. "You've gone too far."

"Sorry," Ginny turned back. Once inside Hufflepuff and sitting down, she realized that she couldn't find her notepad. "Darn it. I must have dropped it."

"Dropped what?" Meredith was only half paying attention, her focus on the latest copy of Witch Weekly that her mother had sent her.

"My notepad. And you're supposed to be studying," Ginny prodded the magazine, "and not reading that drivel."

"Mum said it's suitable for me," Meredith defended her reading habits.

"But it's all you ever read," Ginny pointed out.

"It's better than mooning over Potter, which is all you ever do," Meredith retorted.

"I do not moon over Harry," Ginny scowled at her friend. "He's an idiot."

"Since when?" Meredith didn't believe her friend. "You liked him yesterday."

"Well I don't anymore," Ginny bit out from between clenched teeth. "So shall we do our homework?"

"Yes," Meredith put down her magazine and took out her potions homework. "I wish Snape would moon over us, we might get less homework then."

Ginny went to tell Meredith what had happened but suddenly decided against it. Instead she agreed with her friend's wish. "Me too."

Feeling a little remorseful for mentioning Harry, Meredith held out her secondary notepad. "You can use this if you want."

"I can find some paper in my bag," Ginny began to rummage around, her fingers resting on an unfamiliar book. Pulling it out she frowned, and murmured under her breath, 'T. M. Riddle'. Ginny tried to recall who it might be, but she came up blank.

"Have you found something to write on?" Meredith had placed her main notepad down, and was currently reviewing it for her homework notes.

"I don't know," Ginny's curiosity got the better of her, and she flicked through the book to discover that it was in fact a diary, but an empty one. She therefore decided that it could stand in for her lost notebook. "Actually, I have. Can you tell me exactly what the homework was again?"

"List ten uses for eucalyptus oil, and five uses for St. John's Wort, I mean Wort," Meredith had a little trouble reading her own writing.

"Thanks," Ginny wrote down the homework so that she wouldn't forget what Meredith told her, and then she rummaged in her bag for some parchment and her potions textbook. When she looked back at the diary, the page she had written on was now blank. "Just great! George or Fred must have somehow swapped my ink out again for trick ink."

"I've got some more in the dorm," Meredith got to her feet. "I'll go get it."

While she waited, Ginny glanced back at the diary, and she let out a gasp. Instead of a blank page, there was now writing on the page.

"St. John's Wort is beneficial in the curing of wounds, particularly wounds that have become septic."

As Ginny continued to watch, more words appeared.

"It can also aid in reducing inflammation in sores such as boils. Muggles use it as an anti-depressant. Hypericin in the plant can help increase blood flow to damaged tissue. Hypericin may also help with hypertensive blood flow."

Then, below the passage, a list of ten uses for eucalyptus oil began to appear. Ginny ran a finger over the list. It would have taken her ages to find all ten uses, and as she wrote the list out, she talked softly to herself. "This must be some sort of magical encyclopedia even though it looks like a diary." She had completely finished by the time Meredith returned. "Sorry, I should have come and found you. I realized I had some more ink."

"I was about to say I couldn't find my spare ink," Meredith flopped down. It was only then that she noticed that Ginny was folding up her parchment. "You've finished?"

"I've finished potions," Ginny secured her parchment and placed it in her bag. She knew that Meredith would never ask to copy her work; she was too much of a Hufflepuff to do that. "I'm going to make a start on defense. Can you tell me what the homework was again?"

Ginny again wrote down in the diary the homework that had been assigned, and soon, as before, her writing vanished from the page, and a short time later the answer appeared. Smiling happily to herself, she began to copy what was written in the diary, taking care not to let Meredith see what she was doing.

This continued for several days until, in the hope that the magical diary could help her solve a problem, Ginny wrote down a question not related to school at all. "How can I make someone like me?"

Her writing vanished, and a response came back, "You could always brew a love potion."

"I don't really want to go that far. Just for Harry to notice me," Ginny responded, wanting Harry to like her for who she was, and not because he was under some spell.

Only one word appeared, and it still failed to answer Ginny's question. "Harry?"

Ginny was a little surprised when the diary questioned her, but she responded nevertheless. "Harry Potter. He's a boy that I like."

The diary again asked something out of the ordinary, "And he doesn't like you?"

"No," Ginny responded. "He's going out with one of the third years."

"What year are you in?" The diary asked.

Ginny was starting to get a little unnerved by the diary being able to ask questions like that, but wanting someone to talk to about Harry

she shrugged off her reservations, and began to write back. "I'm in second year."

"What house are you in, and what is your name?"

"Ginny Weasley, and I'm in Hufflepuff. I should have been in Gryffindor with the rest of my family but I begged the Sorting Hat to let me go into Hufflepuff so that I could be with Harry," Ginny scribbled furiously. "But he's going out with Susan Bones."

The diary made her an offer. "I can't help you get Harry but I can help you with your homework as I've been doing so far, and I'm always ready to talk to you."

Now Ginny finally asked what had been lurking in the back of her mind. "What are you? I thought you were some sort of magical encyclopedia."

"I'm very knowledgeable about lots of things, that's true, but I'm not an encyclopedia," the diary revealed little. "And as I said, I'm happy to help with your homework but I'd like something in return. For each piece of homework I answer for you, I'd like to ask you a question about your life."

Ginny hesitated. Her parents had always told her never to trust anything that could think for itself, particularly when you could not see where it kept its brain. "Why?"

"I'm interested in you and the world you live in," the diary responded. "So are we in agreement?"

Half-afraid the diary would stop helping her if she refused, Ginny agreed with the diary's strange request. "Okay."

"And one final thing," the diary wrote "I'd like to keep this to ourselves. I don't mind sharing information with you, but that's all."

Despite her reservations, Ginny felt warm inside that the diary only wanted to pass on knowledge to her. "I won't tell anyone else."

"Then that's settled," with that final comment the diary went blank, and Ginny shut it, slipping it into the bottom of her book bag. There

was no way she was ever going to give such a precious item up, or risk losing it.

Three weeks later

Harry came excitedly into library, "Guess what, there's some sort of wild animal roaming the grounds."

"How do you know?" Susan joined her boyfriend when he sat down at the table next door, the one she was already sitting at being full.

"I've just gotten back from Hagrid's. He said that something slaughtered all of the roosters," Harry revealed.

From the other table, Luna gasped. "That's horrible."

Harry had almost forgotten how fond Luna was of animals. "Yeah, it is."

"Does Hagrid know what did it?" George asked.

"He reckoned on a fox," Harry watched Justin's face drop with disappointment. His friend had obviously been expecting Harry to mention some sort of exotic animal. Harry hadn't quite finished though. "Or maybe a big rodent."

Susan shivered. "I think I'd rather it was a fox."

"Did it eat any of the roosters?" Unlike Luna, Hermione was more interested in the nitty gritty of the matter rather than the welfare of the roosters.

Harry shook his head. "None, they were all just ripped to bits."

"Then it was probably a fox," Luna said in a sad voice. "They'll usually kill everything, but they also normally eat one or two of their kill."

"Perhaps they were disturbed," Ginny suggested.

"Probably," Harry agreed. "Anyway, the Headmaster's going to announce that we can't go out after dark until they discover what did it."

"The Headmaster's getting involved?" Ginny's voice came out in a squeak, and she coughed. "Sorry."

"It's his school," Hermione reminded her. "You looked worried."

"I'm just nervous about what it might be," Ginny gathered up her books. "I have to go."

"See you," Luna called out, and everyone else added their goodbyes, before settling back down to finish their homework.

Once outside the library, Ginny stilled and held out her hands to discover they were shaking. Slipping one hand deep into her bag, she pulled out the diary, and from that, a single black rooster's feather that she had found on her bed that very morning. "I couldn't have done it."

Hurrying back to her room, Ginny opened the diary, and wrote in it. "I'm afraid."

The diary wrote back. "What of?"

Ginny wrote down what had happened, and what she was fearful of, and then waited for a response. After a few moments the diary responded. "Perhaps you brushed against something and picked up a rooster feather. Or it could have been trampled inside on a shoe, and you accidentally managed to get it stuck on you."

At the sensible suggestions Ginny let out a long sigh of relief, and wrote back to the diary. "I couldn't remember going to bed last night, and I was really frightened I might have sleep-walked and hurt the roosters."

"Never mind. You can relax now," the diary answered in what would have been a soothing tone if it had been spoken rather than written. "Get some rest, and we can talk again soon."

Ginny closed the diary up and lay back on her bed. She was tired, and she closed her eyes, soon falling asleep.

Halloween

Harry leaned back against his chair, his stomach fit to burst. "I don't think I've ever eaten so much."

"Madam Pomfrey did say that your appetite might not be back to normal for a while so I didn't expect this," Susan, however, was delighted that an overly thin Harry seemed to have found his normal appetite again.

"I was hungry," Harry said in his defense. "But I wish I hadn't had that last toffee apple."

"But they were good," Justin too had eaten himself into a stupor, "and..."

Whatever Justin had been about to say was lost when one of the first year Gryffindors, Justin didn't know her name, came dashing into the Great Hall in tears. "Help, somebody help."

Albus rose from his seat, and went running down to the young girl, who promptly collapsed in tears. "My dear, whatever is wrong?"

"Dead cat and writing in blood," the girl managed to spit out before dissolving in masses of tears again.

Albus, however, hadn't finished questioning her. "I know this is hard but I need to know where."

"Second floor," the girl managed to get out before it all became too much for her, and she began to sob hysterically. Minerva took her from Albus. "Miss Hardcourt, can you escort Miss Gladstone to the Hospital Wing and ask Madam Pomfrey to give her something for her nerves."

"Right away, Professor," Esther Hardcourt rose from her seat, and slid her arm around the distraught girl's shoulders. "Come with me."

Albus turned around. "Prefects will escort their houses back to their dormitories. Teachers are with me."

When Albus reached the second floor, he soon found what the girl had seen, and he read aloud the writing on the wall. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened, Enemies of the Heir, beware." He turned around to find Filch in tears. "I'm so sorry, Argus."

"She was with me from a kitten," Argus began to howl. "My poor baby."

"Let's go and get a cup of tea," Professor Sinistra, who was a cat lover herself, took pity on the grieving caretaker and led him away.

Albus stared at the message, "I think that had better be erased." He aimed his wand at the message, only to frown when the spell he used failed. "Something else then." Time and time again his efforts were for naught. He turned to Severus. "Perhaps you know of something else."

"I do believe you've covered everything that I'm aware of, Headmaster," Severus himself was a little surprised at the stubborn nature of the writing.

"Then let me," Gilderoy swept forward, his wand in his hand. "Okolo Vadulu."

He was so intent on his efforts that he missed Minerva muttering under her breath. "Absolute poppycock."

Albus' lips twitched involuntarily. "Gilderoy, I fear that this is beyond even someone as learned as you."

"I believe you are right, Headmaster," Gilderoy sighed dramatically. "I'll leave it in your capable hands then."

Albus decided to try a different method, and moments later a new façade appeared. "Let's hope that this works, and that this doesn't escalate."

However, schools being what they were, soon the entire populace was aware of what had been written. It didn't help that the words had quickly reappeared on the brand new façade. Albus had therefore asked Argus to try and scrub the words out, which the caretaker did with an angry gusto but even his efforts failed, and so

Albus had to give up, the words eventually fading on their own after a week. But the pupils' interest did not fade in the same way, and it soon came out, courtesy of Gilderoy Lockhart, exactly what the Chamber of Secrets was, and the school began to guess who the Heir might be. However, when no possible taker could be worked out, the talk eventually died down.

Harry sat in the library, trying to wrestle with his Arithmancy homework. He had quickly discovered that he hated the class, and wished he had taken something else. Normally Hermione would be around to help him, but with all the classes she was taking, she generally never had time for anything or anyone else, unless it was schoolwork or George.

"What's up, Potter?" Draco Malfoy's voice came from behind Harry. "Can't bear to watch Ravenclaw grind Hufflepuff into the ground, or perhaps you don't want to see Diggory in your place."

"I have homework, Malfoy," Harry snapped, the subject of quidditch for him was still very raw. "So go away and let me get on with it."

Draco laughed. "I think little Harry Potter is jealous of Diggory, and that's why he left his homework until now, so that he wouldn't have to see how much better Diggory is."

Harry gritted his teeth, and tried to ignore Draco, who continued to make derogatory remarks about him, and nice ones about Diggory. In the end though, Harry snapped. "If you think Diggory is so wonderful why don't you ask him out on a date?"

"Whoo!" Greg Goyle teased Harry.

Draco was a little more eloquent. "Hit a nerve, did we, Potter?"

"Just go away, Malfoy," Harry ground the words out from between clenched teeth. "I've got better things to do than discuss quidditch with you."

"That's only because you're no longer on a team, unlike me, Potter!" Draco smirked at Harry.

"You only made the team because Daddy bought your way onto it," Harry retaliated. "You couldn't catch a snitch even if danced behind

your back for several minutes." Harry grinned. "Oh yes, that's what happened in your first match, wasn't it? Colin Creevey..."

Harry's words were cut off when he had to duck from a purple spell that was flung at him. Madam Pince, who had heard the contretemps between the two boys, stepped in. "Stop that at once, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco turned, his wand pointing at the librarian, and for a moment he debated sending a curse at her as well. But commonsense settled into his brain, and he lowered his wand. "You're nothing, Potter."

"Enough!" Irma Pince's voice hardened, and grew louder. "Mr. Malfoy, twenty points from Slytherin, and a detention with Professor McGonagall."

"But that's not fair," Draco yelled back at the woman. "He started it."

"Not from where I was standing, he didn't," A former Slytherin, Irma unwillingly defended Harry. "Now unless you have any homework to do, I suggest you leave my library."

Draco threw an evil look at the woman before nodding to Greg and Vince, and the three of them left. Harry stood up. "I'm very sorry, Madam Pince. I shouldn't have allowed him to make me angry."

"No, you should not have, Mr. Potter," Irma peered at Harry. "And for doing so, I'm taking twenty points from Hufflepuff. Now make sure you clean up before you leave. I don't want ink stains marring my books."

Harry wanted to scream at the injustice of the librarian's deduction of points but he had little choice but to accept them. "Bloody Malfoy." Harry kept his voice below hearing range while he cleaned up his desk, and then made his way back to Hufflepuff.

On entering the common room, he discovered everyone celebrating. Hufflepuff had beaten Ravenclaw by almost two hundred points, and Cedric was being feted as the man of the moment. Harry took one look at the festivities, and headed for his dormitory. He wasn't alone for long, Justin coming in after him. "You have a face like a wet afternoon."

Harry told him what had gone down with Malfoy. "The little toe rag cost us twenty points."

"I shouldn't worry too much about that," Justin commiserated with Harry. "I got more than that yesterday for my work in Ancient Runes if you remember."

Harry ignored Justin's comment, and continued to rant about Draco Malfoy. "It still sucks that that jumped up little prat can just buy his way onto the team." Harry flopped onto his bed. "It's not fair."

"I know," Justin sat down on his own bed. "And I'm sorry you can't play quidditch this year."

"I shouldn't resent Cedric, but I do," Harry could feel tears close to the surface. "Why was it only me who got dragon flu so badly?"

"Don't forget, Hermione got it as well," Justin gently reminded Harry. "Although to be honest, I had thought it would have been Susan who should have come down with it that badly."

"Why would you think that?" Harry's tone suddenly became defensive. "They've both spent time with me."

"But Susan's the one you've spent so much time snogging, and she barely got a cold. Unless you've been spending some secret time with Hermione that we don't know about," Justin laughed at his own comment, and he continued to tease his friend. "So, Harry, have you?"

"Of course I bloody haven't," Harry's irritability was not improved by Justin's rather close to the mark comment, and he got up from his bed his tone angry as he continued. "You know as well as I do that Hermione barely gives anything except for her homework a second glance."

"Harry, I'm sorry," Justin immediately apologized when he realized how upset his friend was. "I shouldn't have said that. I was out of order."

Harry wanted to turn around and tell his friend that yes he was, but he couldn't. Instead he responded in a quiet, guilty voice. "No, you're not."

Justin took a few seconds for what Harry was insinuating to sink in. "You're seeing Hermione as well?"

"No!" Harry's voice became a high-pitched screech, and he started coughing, showing that the infection still had not been entirely eradicated from his system.

Justin passed him a glass of water. "Then what are you talking about?"

"I kissed Hermione," Harry came clean.

"Does Susan know?" Justin asked, more than a little surprised at his friend's uncharacteristic behavior.

"No, and it happened during the holidays before Hermione started dating George," Harry took another sip of water, and then told his friend what had happened. "...and we both said it was an accident, and that we wouldn't tell anyone."

"Don't worry I won't tell anyone either," Justin promised after listening to Harry's tale. He then gave a huge sigh. "How do you do it? I'm almost fourteen and I still haven't kissed anyone, and you've kissed two girls."

"It's not that big a deal," Harry sat back down on his bed. "I mean it's nice but it wouldn't bother me that much if I didn't have a girlfriend."

"Well it bothers me," Justin sighed again. "Father keeps drumming it into me that I'm expected to meet a suitable girl, - Justin pronounced it 'gel' as he mimicked his father – and then settle down and continue the family line."

"So you only want a girlfriend because your Dad keeps on at you?" Harry liked to listen to Justin talk about his family, even though they seemed a little strange.

"No, but it would help shut him up," Justin couldn't tell Harry what else his father had said; he was far too embarrassed.

"Is there a girl you like?" Harry began to think of suitable candidates for Justin's girlfriend.

"No-one much," Justin went red.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Who is she?"

Justin sighed miserably. "Cho Chang. But I've got no chance with her."

Harry knew that Justin was right with his comment. "Sorry."

"I'm sure I'll end up liking someone else," Justin brushed off Harry's commiserations. "Anyway, even if she wasn't going out with Roger Davies, I'm sure I'm the last person she'd ever be interested in."

"What makes you say that?" Harry didn't understand where Justin was coming from.

"Because I'm me. Now if I was someone like you, I'd stand more of a chance," When Harry snorted, Justin listed what he saw as Harry's attributes. "Come on, Harry. You're famous, you're clever and you're decent looking. I bet if Chang wasn't going out with Davies, and you asked her out, she'd say yes. Well, if you weren't going out with Susan, I bet she would."

"I doubt that. I'm not good looking, and I'm not that clever," Harry disparaged Justin's comments. "And being famous doesn't count. Davies isn't famous and Chang still likes him, so you can rule that argument out, although he is, for a boy, okay looking." At Justin's dismal look, Harry tried to bolster his friend's ego. "Justin, there's nothing wrong with how you look, you're really clever, you're a nice person, and you're Vice Captain of the quidditch team. There's no reason why Chang wouldn't go out with you if she was free."

"Yeah right, Harry," Justin flopped onto the bed. "Anyway, Chang is never going to drop Davies; they've been going out together for over a year now, so why bother torturing myself?"

"You really like her that much?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Justin's head bobbed violently up and down. "Probably almost as much as you like Susan."

Harry liked Susan, but he was most definitely not as taken with her as Justin believed, and he therefore fudged his answer. "Probably."

Justin got to his feet, and changed the subject. "I'm going to get a shower. I had to take over as Chaser with Ginny and Smith when we lost Cadwallader and Groves."

Harry's face lit up. He had been unable to watch the game because Madam Pomfrey had banned him from being outside in the current wet and cold weather. "Did you score?"

"Yeah!" Justin grinned, all his anguish over Cho Chang dispersing. "Five times."

"Wicked," Harry grabbed his own shower stuff. "You can tell me about the match while we shower."

Nothing further untoward happened in the school until a week after the Hufflepuff match when Gilderoy Lockhart made an announcement that caused both great joy and great consternation. "May I have your attention?"

The entirety of the Great Hall swiveled to look at the teacher, except for Harry, who loathed the man. Now that he was the center of attention, Gilderoy visibly preened himself. "Professor Dumbledore - here Gilderoy took a moment out to bow slightly to the Headmaster - has agreed to let me open up a dueling club."

Cheers, loud comments, and clapping filled the Great Hall. Gilderoy basked in what he perceived as admiration. "Now, now, let me finish."

Silence filled the Hall after a short time, and Gilderoy subsequently began to inform the students about this 'thrilling' opportunity. Having finished his breakfast, Harry rose to his feet to leave, only to regret doing so when Gilderoy immediately locked onto him. "I see Mr. Potter wishes to be our first enrollee. I'll save you the trouble of writing your name down, and do it for you."

Harry's mouth tightened, and not bothering to respond, he left the Great Hall. Justin also got up, and like Harry, was quickly 'enrolled' in the club. Also ignoring Lockhart, Justin ran out of the Hall after his friend. "Harry, wait up."

"I don't want to be in his stupid club," Harry grumbled at Justin when his friend reached him. "He's an idiot. Look at what he did to those Cornish Pixies in Hermione's class."

Everyone in the school had heard about Gilderoy letting a cage full of pixies go free, and then leaving the students clean up the mess. Most people, well, most of the girls, had defended him saying that it was a good lesson for them, whereas the boys, who had quickly cottoned on to what a narcissist and rubbish teacher Gilderoy was, had denigrated the man. However, Justin suspected that despite some students' misgivings about Lockhart, there would still be plenty of takers for the dueling club. "Don't go then. He enrolled me, and I'm not going."

"Good, because I'm not going to his bloody stupid club either," Harry snarled before realizing he was ranting unfairly at Justin. He therefore stopped, took several deep breaths, and apologized. "Sorry. I'm always so grumpy lately."

"It's okay, Harry," Justin patted his friend on the shoulder. "You're still not exactly yourself after your illness."

"You're telling me," Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "I swear I keep hearing voices in the wall."

"What do you mean?" Justin opened the library door for Harry.

"I don't know," Harry found his favorite spot, the table furthest away from Irma Pince, was empty, and he sat down. "It's almost like whispering, but I can't quite make out the words."

"Probably the ghosts," Justin answered logically, before looking around the empty library. "Why did you come here? You don't have any books with you."

"Because it's Sunday morning, I want some peace and quiet, and I doubt that anyone else will come in here just yet," Harry set forth his reasoning.

"You're wrong," Justin had heard the door opening, and he turned around to see who it was. "It's alright though, it's our lot."

Neville, who'd been forced into signing up by Ron, dropped miserably into a chair, while grumbling at his friend. "I can barely cast anything."

"You managed to cast stupefy on me," Ron reminded him of Neville's first year.

"That was different," Neville complained. "Every time I've tried since then it goes wrong."

"You were probably running on adrenalin," George informed the chubby boy. "But you need to keep practicing."

"Why bother?" Neville slumped even lower.

"Because one day..." George began.

"...you'll need to take your OWLs," Fred finished, doing a brilliant impression of his mother.

"That's a long way off," Neville dropped his face into his hands. "I'm not going to the club. It's not as if anyone will care if I turn up, unlike Harry."

"What do you mean?" Harry leant forward, making sure to keep his voice low so that it didn't carry to the librarian who was staring suspiciously at them.

"Malfoy was bragging that he was going to show you up in a duel," Ron snorted derisively. "Can't see that though. I mean he chickened out last time."

"I'm sure he's learnt a lot more evil spells since then," Luna piped up. "And that's probably why he got Galloping Gackle Spoit."

Hermione, who was pulling out her homework, responded to her friend's dubious comment. "I doubt that, Luna, but you're probably right about Malfoy knowing more spells. If he takes you on, be careful, Harry."

"I'm not going, so it won't matter," Harry folded his arms as he finished speaking.

"But you have to go," Susan pouted, "I've signed up as well."

Harry refrained from saying something rude to his girlfriend. "I don't care. I'm not going."

Susan's face fell, and her lip trembled. "Please, Harry. Do it for me."

Harry caved at her upset look. "Fine, I'll go once, and that's it."

"Thanks, Harry," Susan kissed Harry's cheek, earning her a sarcastic remark from the librarian. "We'd better find somewhere else to talk."

Harry had no idea that his agreement was the next link in the chain that would lead to Harry's rather miserable year.

End of Chapter: Justin's girl problem comes to an unexpected end; Harry faces a surprising opponent; Ginny has a shocking knight-in-shining-armor defend her.

Chapter 26: The Dueling Club

Harry reluctantly headed for the first meeting of the dueling club, Susan holding his hand. "I'm going this stupid club one time only, and that's it."

"And I just know you'll feel differently after you've been once," Susan quite wrongly guessed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I doubt it."

"Oh stop it, Harry," Susan impatiently tugged Harry into the Great Hall.

Harry had expected to see a large crowd but not what appeared to be most of the school. "I really wouldn't be missed if I didn't stay."

Luna chose that moment to wave at Harry. "Harry, over here."

Because Luna's voice carried quite clearly, most of the Great Hall turned around, and Harry therefore had little choice except to join his friend. "Hi, Luna. I'm surprised you came."

"I didn't sign up," Luna had every intention of having as little to do with Lockhart as possible. "But I thought you might like a friend here. I know you don't really want to be here at all."

Unlike Susan's harping on at him, Luna's gentle support cheered Harry up. "Thanks."

"What about me?" Justin teased.

"Lockhart doesn't pick on you," Luna reminded him. "Just Harry."

And speaking of the teacher, he flounced his way over to the stage and climbed up onto it. "Good evening, children."

Some of the older students scowled, not liking the 'children' comment, but everyone turned to face the stage. Justin and Harry shared a disgusted look, before also turning around. Seeing that he had everyone's attention, Gilderoy preened himself before starting to speak. "I would like to welcome you to the first meeting of the

dueling club. Tonight I will be running the club with help from my assistant, Professor Snape."

Harry's eyebrows rose a little at the assistant reference, and he shared a smirk with Luna, who too thought it was rather funny, particularly as Severus was looking rather put out. After the Snape comment, Harry switched off as Lockhart continued to bumble on until he finally realized that his name was being called. "Me?"

"Perhaps not," Severus stopped Lockhart's attempt to bring Harry to the stage. "I think we should start with a student who actually has some dueling experience." Severus scanned the crowd. "Zabini, Malfoy. Up here."

Hermione, who had slipped in behind Harry, whispered, "Luna was right about Malfoy getting more experience. I bet Snape has been helping him."

She shut up when Snape glared in the children's direction, but having gotten her point across, Hermione was happy to do so.

Blaise Zabini readied himself for the duel. His mother was an excellent dueler, and he had the feeling that what she had taught him would exceed anything an idiot like Lockhart could impart. The only reason he was there at all was because Severus had made it mandatory for the entirety of Slytherin to attend. If Severus had to attend, then so did his house.

Across from Blaise, Draco Malfoy flourished his wand, and started to position himself. He believed he would easily beat his roommate, his father having taught him quite a lot over the summer.

Severus waited until both boys had assumed the correct stance, before speaking. "You may begin on the count of three. One, two, three."

Draco immediately sent a fairly innocuous stunning spell at Blaise and skipped to his right to avoid the tickling spell Blaise had sent at him. Grinning, he sent a more vicious boils spell at Blaise, who returned fire with a spell that would have made Draco's skin turn purple and itch if it had made contact.

Draco's next spell, a stupefy spell, missed Blaise by a mile, but Draco stupidly went right again to avoid Blaise's next attack, which was exactly where Blaise's disarming spell went, smacking Draco squarely in the chest. Blaise smirked as Draco's wand shot through the air and Blaise summoned it. "I believe I win."

"Not quite," Draco went to pull out a secondary wand, only to stop at the sound of Severus' declaration that the duel was over.

As Draco lowered his hand, Harry whispered to Justin. "He had another wand, and I bet Snape didn't want anyone to know."

Severus turned around. "I do believe we'll have two students from Hufflepuff next. Potter, Weasley, get up here."

Harry was rather surprised to be pitted against Ginny, but he did as he was requested, taking some enjoyment at the bewildered look Lockhart was currently displaying. The man obviously did not like his dueling club being taken over by Severus, but he also patently had no idea how to stop him.

Ginny stood opposite Harry, and, as Draco and Blaise had, she raised her wand. Harry did the same. Snape made the same declaration as he had for the Slytherins, and Ginny let rip with her favorite spell, the bat bogey hex.

Harry was a little shocked at the vehemence Ginny was showing, and he hit her with a spell designed to knock her off her feet that was far more powerful than he intended.

As Harry had expected, Ginny flew through the air, but managed to retain her wand. Now more than a little angry she let rip with another spell. "Serpensortia."

Harry's eyes went wide as a massive green hued snake appeared in the middle of the dais. "Oh God."

"I'll deal with it," Gilderoy dashed forward before anyone could stop him, and aimed at the snake. "Ventilus Aspus."

The snake flew into the air, landing back on the dais right next to where Susan was standing. The now furious snake raised itself up

and hissed menacingly at the girl. Harry yelled out, "Susan, get back."

Transfixed with fear, Susan couldn't move. She hated snakes with a passion, and this one was not only huge, but it was also lying right in front of her. Realizing that his girlfriend wasn't going to do as he said, Harry shot forward and began waving his arms around. "Get away from her."

Gasps filled the room, but Harry didn't register them at all; his entire focus was upon the snake. He screamed at it again to get away, not for a minute expecting it to obey but it did. The large green snake then turned to look at Harry.

"Potter, stand away from that snake," Severus drawled in an urgent voice. "I will destroy it."

Luna, who was standing next to Susan, made a distressed sound, before saying something. "That's not fair. It isn't the snake's fault."

Harry agreed with his friend. "Luna's right, Sir. It's not the snake's fault. Perhaps we could get Hagrid to take it in."

"A snake in a school, Potter?" Severus sneered at Harry. "That would hardly be safe."

The snake, however, had made up its own mind, and while Severus and Harry argued, it slithered quickly across the stage, wrapping its head around Harry's legs, and using its body to lever itself up. When the snake's head became level with his own, Harry swallowed nervously, unable to look anywhere but at the hissing snake. "What do I do now?"

Again gasps filled the room, momentarily diverting Harry's attention away from the snake, and he discovered that everyone was looking at him with varying degrees of horror, dismay and confusion. Well everyone except for Severus and Luna were looking at him that way; Severus was displaying his usual disgusted look that he wore when Harry was around, and Luna was looking delighted. But it was Susan's look of fear and horror that worried Harry the most, and in spite of the large animal that was now wrapped around him, Harry sought to alleviate her concerns. "Don't worry, Susan, it will be okay."

He was stunned when Susan simply turned and ran, the doors flying open when she got near them. He then became aware that Lockhart was talking to him. "I shall deal with this, Harry, never fear."

"I think not," Severus stepped in front of the dandified teacher, and trained his wand on the snake. "Try not to move, Potter."

"Sir, we can't hurt it," Harry wrapped his arms, which were still free, around the snake's body. He didn't know why but any fear that the snake might hurt him had vanished, and now Harry was concerned that the innocent creature would have to die because of Ginny.

By now Albus had been made aware that something was amiss in the Great Hall, and he hurried down to the room in question. When he entered, he found Harry and Severus in a stand-off. "Professor Snape, what is going on?"

"The snake was conjured up during a duel, and Potter is refusing to let me destroy it, Headmaster," Severus explained what had happened.

"Harry?" Albus wanted Harry's side of the story.

"It's not hurting anyone, Sir," Harry stroked the snake, feeling it shiver under his touch. "I think that Hagrid should make sure it's okay, and then maybe set it free."

"I agree," Albus couldn't see any reason for killing the snake. "But we need to get it off you."

"I don't know how to get the snake off me, Sir," Harry glanced into the snake's face. "He seems to like it here."

Albus paled when he heard Harry's response but he didn't gasp like everyone else in the Great Hall. "I think we should clear the Hall first. Professor Lockhart, if you would deal with that, I will deal with Harry and the snake. Mr. Marsters, if you could ask Hagrid to join us."

"What about Miss Weasley?" Severus indicated a white and shaking Ginny.

"You cast the spell?" Albus asked Ginny.

"Yes, Sir," Ginny's voice was shaking as she responded.

"Where did you learn it?" Albus asked in a suspicious voice.

Ginny's heart almost stopped in fear, and she had no idea how to respond. She had promised the diary, who she had found out was named Tom, that she would keep their secret. Just as she was about to start crying a surprising figure leapt to her defense. "From me."

All eyes turned to Severus, and Albus had to try hard to keep his mouth closed. "You?"

"Miss Weasley had a detention with me yesterday," Severus began, telling the partial truth, "and we got onto the subject of the dueling club when Miss Weasley asked what potions might be used in such an arena. The conversation subsequently drifted into defense, and I happened to mention the Serpensortia spell as being believed to be a favorite of Slytherin's. I didn't expect the idiotic girl to use it."

Trusting Severus, Albus had no reason to doubt his explanation. "Miss Weasley, did you have any idea what the spell would do?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, Sir."

"Very well," Albus accepted her denial. "Ten points from Gryffindor for showing a lack of judgment, and a detention with Professor Snape. You may go."

Ginny burst into relieved tears. Severus glanced over at Harry, who had been listening to the interaction. "As I don't believe you need me here, I will escort Miss Weasley out, and arrange her detention."

Suspecting that Severus was going to berate the girl for her actions, Albus warned him. "She is already being punished."

"I agree with our esteemed Headmaster, Professor Snape. You can't punish the poor child," having returned, Gilderoy butted in when Ginny's sobbing grew louder at the thought of being alone with Severus. "I do believe she might need something to calm her down. She is rather distraught."

"Then I will escort her to the hospital wing," Severus pointed to the door. "Let's go, Miss Weasley."

Ginny had little choice but to leave the room with Severus. And now that she had been dealt with, Albus focused his attention on Harry. "Let's get that snake off you."

"How will you get him off, Sir?" Harry found that he was entranced by the snake.

Even though he could understand some of the question, Albus didn't get the chance to answer, the snake getting there first. "I am not male, snake speaker."

Harry could see the Headmaster's face, so he knew that he hadn't said the words. "Who said that?"

"I did, snake speaker," the snake moved its head closer to Harry's as it spoke.

Harry went rigid with surprise. "But you're a snake."

"I am," the snake confirmed, "and you are a two-legged snake speaker."

"Harry," the Headmaster interrupted, "I need you to ask the snake to release you. Tell it that it won't be harmed."

Harry relaxed, presuming that the Headmaster had put some sort of translation spell on him. "Okay." He looked directly at the snake. "Can you please let go of me? The Headmaster has said that you won't be hurt."

"Very well," the snake hissed at Harry, and then uncoiled itself from around him, and settled on the floor.

"Ah, that looks like our transportation," Albus smiled at Hagrid who had just entered the room. "Hagrid, we have a rather large snake that needs checking over. I fear it will have to stay with you until after the winter, if that is alright."

Hagrid's face softened at the sight of the snake. "Who's a pretty boy then?"

"It's a girl," Harry enlightened him.

Hagrid was now even more delighted. "I'll have to think of a name for her."

"I'll check to see if she's got one," Harry knelt down. "Hagrid wants to know if you have a name."

The snake shook its head. "I do not."

"Is there anything you'd like to be called?" Harry decided to give the snake the option before Hagrid saddled it with something like 'Roger'.

"There is not," the snake confirmed.

"What did she say, Harry?" Hagrid asked, completely unperturbed by Harry's ability. If Albus wasn't bothered, then neither was he.

"That she doesn't have a name, and there's nothing she knows she wants to be called," Harry stood back up. "Is there a name you want to give her, Sir?"

"No, perhaps you would like to name her, Harry," Albus suggested.

"Is that alright, Hagrid?" Harry checked with the big man.

"Course it is. She's still your snake," Hagrid held out his giant arm. "She can ride back to meh hut on me if she wants to."

Harry again knelt down and informed the snake that Hagrid would take care of her, but that he would still visit her as much as he could, and that when he'd found a suitable name he'd drop by. He'd just finished speaking when Minerva came into the room. "Mr. Potter, some of your friends are here. They didn't want to leave until they knew you were alright."

"They can come in," Albus gave permission for the students to re-enter the Great Hall.

George, Fred, Ron, Justin, Hermione and Luna walked in, Luna skipping up to Hagrid. "Can I touch her?"

The snake hissed at Luna, making Luna rear back. Harry walked over to Hagrid and spoke to the snake. "She's my friend."

But when Luna again tried to approach the snake, it hissed at her once more. Hagrid gently stroked her head. "Perhaps she only likes men."

Hermione decided to keep her distance. "Harry, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry could see that Hermione was rather worried. "What's wrong?"

"You don't know, do you?" Hermione shared a brief look with the Headmaster.

"Know what?" Harry was completely lost.

"You were speaking Parseltongue," George blurted out.

"What?" Harry was still none-the-wiser.

"He means that you are able to speak to snakes, Harry," Albus moved closer to Harry and the snake. Again the snake hissed a warning. "I don't think that she dislikes just men."

"Sorry, Sir," Harry apologized for the snake. "But I thought you put some sort of spell on me."

"I did not," Albus' face was grave. "There is no known spell that can aid you to speak to snakes. It is something you can either do or you cannot."

"Like being a Metamorphmagus?" Harry asked.

Albus knew then that Tonks had shared her own innate talent. "Exactly."

Harry was thrilled. "That's wicked."

"It's actually a bad thing, Harry," Hermione interrupted Harry's moment of pleasure.

"How can being able to talk to snakes be bad?" Harry protested. "I bet lots of people can talk to snakes."

Albus shook his head. "It's a very rare talent. In the last century, apart from you there has only been one known Parselmouth, which is the correct name for someone who can speak Parseltongue."

Harry had a sinking feeling he knew now why it was a bad thing. "You-Know-Who?"

"Yes," Albus then confirmed Harry's feeling. "That is why Miss Granger said it was a bad thing."

"And the whole school knows I can speak Parseltongue," Harry finally understood the varying looks of horror and surprise. "This can't be good."

"I shouldn't worry too much about it, Harry," Albus sympathized. "It will be a ten minute furor but then things will die down."

Unfortunately Albus couldn't have been more wrong.

Harry and Justin made their way back to the Hufflepuff common room together, Harry talking about his ability with his friend. "You don't seem bothered at what I can do."

"I think it's pretty cool you can speak to snakes," Justin actually felt a little jealous of Harry's ability. "And I think it's ridiculous to be afraid of something like that."

"I have a feeling that you're probably one of the few who feels like that," Harry stopped outside the door to the Hufflepuff common room. "Do you think everyone is going to ignore me?"

"There's only one way to find out," Justin pointed to the door handle. "Just open the door."

"Well, here goes," Harry opened the door to the Hufflepuff common room. What had been a hubbub of commotion and noise became a vacuum. Not even a whisper disturbed the silence. Harry's heart sank at the sight of a weeping Susan in Cedric Diggory's arms. Harry approached them. "Susan, I..."

Susan responded by burying her wet face in Cedric's chest and crying harder. Cedric gave Harry a consoling look. "Leave it for tonight, Harry."

Harry was glad that at least one person could meet him eye to eye. "Thanks, Cedric."

"Let's go to bed," Justin suggested.

Harry marched disconsolately into the room to find Ernie was already there. Harry took one look at the boy's face, and started rummaging through his chest, pulling out a treasured possession. "I'll see you later, Justin."

"I'm coming with you," Justin gave Ernie a look that spoke volumes, and then he followed his friend out of the bedroom.

Susan was still crying, and Harry tried not to look at her or anyone else as he made his way out of the room. Cedric, however, called out before Harry could leave. "It's curfew in less than an hour, Harry."

"Thanks, Cedric," Harry opened the door, and Justin followed him.

"So where are we going?" Justin fell in step with Harry.

"I don't know." But Harry obviously did, as he headed for the exit. "I need some fresh air."

"Then fresh air it is," Justin shivered in the cold night air, and cast a warming spell. "It's freezing. This spell won't last long."

Even as dejected as he was, Harry realized that even with warming spells, they would be miserable outside. "Let's go to the Runes classroom."

The classroom in question was one of Harry's favorites. One wall was made up almost entirely of stained glass depicting images of time gone by, and there was a study corner where students were encouraged to sit down and talk out their problems. There were, of course, standard desks, but most students preferred the informal atmosphere afforded by the study corner and the plump, leather

sofas that were placed there. And it was onto one of these sofas that Harry dropped. "What am I going to do?"

"Nothing," Justin said as he flopped down beside him. "It's not you who's got a problem with the Parseltongue."

"But what about Susan?" Harry couldn't help but see his girlfriend's frightened face.

"Do you want me to answer honestly?" Justin asked his friend before responding to the question.

"Yes," Harry preferred to get the truth.

"I think she's being stupid," Justin was pretty blunt about how he felt. "So you can speak to snakes. You're still the same person you were before she found that out."

"But she obviously thinks I'm evil or something," Harry had to admit to himself that he was disappointed with how his girlfriend had reacted.

"Then she's an idiot," Justin defended Harry. "Neither Hermione nor Luna ran away. They were both more concerned about you than the snake thing."

Harry experienced a small warmth inside when he thought about what Justin had said. "And so did Ron and the twins."

"And the Weasleys and Luna are purebloods," Justin reminded Harry. "So they should have been more freaked out by what happened."

"But Susan lost her parents to You-Know-Who," Harry couldn't help but offer up an excuse for Susan's behavior.

"And so did you," Justin argued, and then he wiggled his eyebrows. "Not unless, of course, as an evil infant you set it up with You-Know-Who so that one day you could rule the world together without parents to get in the way."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry burst out laughing. "I'm so glad that you're my friend."

"Likewise, Harry." After spending some time talking, Justin stood up, and grabbed Harry's unused invisibility cloak from him. "Come on. I think we should get back."

Bolstered by Justin's words and his presence, Harry followed his friend back to the Hufflepuff common room. Susan was nowhere to be seen, but Cedric was there, and he came over. "Are you alright?"

"Could be better," Harry gave a small smile.

"I just wanted you to know that I'm here if you need anyone to talk to," Cedric liked the younger boy, and he thought that the talk that Harry might be the Heir just because he could speak Parseltongue was absolute hogwash. "And I don't believe you're the Heir."

"Heir?" Harry's face mirrored the confusion he was feeling. "What Heir?"

Cedric reminded Harry of what had been written on the wall. "Because you can speak to snakes, some people are saying that you opened the Chamber."

"That's just stupid," Harry wasn't happy. "Thanks for letting me know. I'm going to bed."

The next day when Harry tried to speak to Susan, she avoided him. "Well, it looks as though you're no longer alone in having no girlfriend, Justin."

"Sorry, mate," Justin patted Harry on the back. "Susan will have to wait. It's getting late, and we'd better get to class."

Harry tried several times during the day to speak to Susan, failing every time. In the end he gave up, and headed back into his dorm room. "Looks as though I was right about me being single. Susan's avoiding me."

Justin was on Harry's side. "It's entirely her loss."

Harry smiled at his friend. "Thanks, Justin."

Susan's refusal to speak to Harry made things difficult for the little group of friends, with everyone except for her accepting Harry's ability. Both Luna and Hermione had talked to her, and Susan had said that she couldn't deal with Harry's ability, and that she was sorry, but it was over. Feeling uncomfortable with the others, Susan then began to drift towards Hannah Abbott, who had taken Susan's side, agreeing with her friend that Harry's ability was something akin to evil.

After two weeks, it became apparent that Susan was no longer part of the group, and Harry had to accept the fact that, just like Justin, he was now single. But for Justin that was shortly about to change.

Justin shook the snow off his quidditch cloak without looking. Hearing a gasp he turned around. "Luna! I'm really sorry."

"I like the snow," And to prove it, Luna licked away a few snowflakes that had fallen on her hand. "Especially how it tastes."

Justin laughed at the happy smile Luna was displaying, and he decided that she looked rather pretty with snowflakes dotting her blonde hair, and came to a decision. "Luna, would you like to take a walk outside?"

"I'd love to," Luna responded enthusiastically. "We might see snow fairies."

"We might," Justin responded even though he had no idea what snow fairies were.

Harry was sitting reading when a somewhat bemused Justin came into the dormitory. "Are you alright?"

"I'm going out with Luna Lovegood," Justin sat down on the bed. "Well, I asked her out, and she kissed me, so I think I'm going out with her, even though she didn't say yes."

Harry shot upright. "You don't like Cho anymore?"

"Not exactly but I like Luna," Justin had gotten closer to the younger girl after Harry's incident with the snake, both wanting to defend their friend. "I think she's funny and really pretty."

Harry was really pleased for his friend. "At least one of us has a girlfriend now."

"Susan might change her mind," Justin pulled off his boots.

"It wouldn't matter if she did," Harry had thought long and hard about what he would do if Susan did so. "I wouldn't go back out with her."

As much as he liked Susan, Justin had also been disappointed by the girl's actions. "I'm sorry but I agree with you."

"Amelia wrote to me," Harry lifted up the letter the head of BritAD had sent to him. "She said she was sorry that she hadn't written sooner but she's been out of the country. And she supports me."

"It's just a shame that Susan isn't more like her aunt," Justin by now had stripped down to his boxer shorts. "I'm going for a hot shower."

"I need one as well," Harry had been putting it off, wanting to talk to his friend about the letter. "Did I tell you that Lucy also sent me a letter?"

The two boys drifted into the showers together talking about the head of BritAD and Lucy. Elsewhere in the building, a delighted Luna had tracked down Hermione to the library. "Hello."

Hermione knew something was up the moment she laid eyes on her friend. "What's going on?"

"Justin kissed me," Luna giggled. "Well, I kissed him first but then he kissed me again and again and again."

Thoroughly distracted from her divination homework, Hermione put down her quill. "You're going out with Justin?"

Luna's head bobbed up and down in affirmation. "Yes. He took me for a walk in the snow holding my hand. Then he asked me to be his girlfriend, and I kissed him. And did I mention he kissed me?"

Hermione had never seen Luna so rapt before, never even when she talking about Crumple Horned Snorkacks. "You really like him, don't you?"

"Yes," Luna sighed. "My first kiss was everything I thought it would be. Just like yours and Harry's."

"Shh," Hermione hissed at her best friend, looking around in alarm. "Someone might hear you."

"There's no-one here," Luna dropped her head into hands. "It was perfect, Hermione."

As the two girls talked about Luna's first kiss, neither of them had any idea that someone was eavesdropping. Ginny Weasley had been behind the bookcase at the rear of the table Hermione was sitting and couldn't help overhearing the girls' conversation. Shocked, Ginny waited a short time before heading out of the library, neither Luna nor Hermione spotting her. She had to tell Tom.

Next Chapter: Harry spends Christmas with the Weasleys; a death at Hogwarts causes problems for Harry.

Chapter 27: A Death in Hogwarts

Harry made his way into the library, a smile letting those there know he had been successful. George nudged Hermione, who had her head in a book. "Someone looks happy."

Hermione glanced up at Harry. "So she liked the name?"

"Loved it," Harry sat down next to Luna and Justin. "She said it felt like a new skin to her."

Luna, who had helped Hermione and Harry find a name for the snake, gave a little shiver. "I don't like the idea of snakes shedding skins." Then she smiled. "But I'm glad that Nagini is happy with our choice."

"She was," Harry decided not to tell Luna that he had helped to feed the snake, making Nagini even happier. "She thought that linking her name to the meaning of 'snake' was a great idea."

"I'm glad to hear that she liked the name but I really have to get on," Hermione gave Harry an apologetic smile, and settled back down to her reading.

Luna glanced over at Hermione, who she knew would already be in a different world. "She works too hard."

"I've tried telling her that but she won't listen," George also glanced at his girlfriend. "Nor does she seem to take much notice of the world around her once she's studying."

Hermione didn't seem to have heard the discussion, and she carried on reading. Harry thought his friend was getting rather thin, but he was not about to say that, having the feeling that despite her air of ignorance, Hermione was very much aware of what was being said around her. Instead he changed the subject. "Where's Ginny?"

"Another detention with Snape," George grimaced.

"I'm glad it's not me," Harry's life was now much better in potions. He no longer had to hand in his potions to Dumbledore due to the fact that Snape was far fairer in dealing with Harry's work.

As the children discussed Snape, Albus Dumbledore was on his way to see the man.

Ginny glanced up as the Headmaster came into the room. She stayed where she was when told she could remain.

Albus drew Severus to one side. "This is getting as bad as Harry."

"Not this time," Severus knew he was about to surprise the Headmaster. "Miss Weasley asked for these detentions."

"I beg your pardon?" Albus could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

Severus brought an unsuspecting Ginny into the conversation. "Miss Weasley, will you please clarify with the Headmaster that you chose to take these detentions."

Ginny nodded. "I did, Sir."

"And may I ask why?" Albus could not believe that someone would volunteer for detentions with Severus.

Ginny's heart leapt into her mouth, but as before, Severus came to her rescue, and told the Headmaster what he wanted to hear. "After the snake incident, Miss Weasley and I talked after we left the Great Hall, and it was decided that it would be better for Miss Weasley if she actually understood what she was doing," Severus pulled a face. "That fool Lockhart is a poor excuse for a teacher, and she needed some guidance. I therefore offered to do provide some."

"Why?" Albus asked bluntly, still barely able to believe what he was hearing.

"Because not only does Miss Weasley have a potential for Defense but she also has the same aptitude for potions as her twin brothers," Severus hated admitted how good the twins were. "And I believe both gifts should be nurtured. As you know, my reputation is hardly stellar among the pupils, and Miss Weasley was a little uncomfortable at admitting to others how much she enjoys potions and that she is learning defense from me, hence the manufactured detentions."

Albus was only too well aware of how passionate Severus was about potions and, to a lesser extent, Defense against the Dark Arts, and it filled him with joy that he was finally trying to pass on this knowledge to a student; something Albus believed he would never witness. "In that case I owe you an apology."

"Thank you," Severus acknowledged the apology.

"And I will arrange something to make this a little easier on both you and Miss Weasley," Albus didn't say what it was going to be, instead turning away to leave. "Goodnight, Severus, Miss Weasley."

"Goodnight, Headmaster," the two chorused. Severus waited for Albus to leave before putting Ginny on the spot. "Now, Miss Weasley. I think the time has come to tell me exactly where you learnt the Serpensortia spell, or I'm going to be only too happy to go after the Headmaster and bring him back."

Ginny was trapped. She had been stuck in detention after detention for refusing to tell Severus, and now she was up against a wall. "I have a magical encyclopedia. It told me."

"So why didn't you just say that before?" Severus knew exactly why Ginny hadn't told him, but he was enjoying taunting the girl.

"Because I was afraid you would take it away from me," Ginny admitted.

"And why would I do something like that?" Severus asked archly.

Ginny went quiet before owning up. "It helps me with my homework."

Severus knew then that this was how his Master had managed to inveigle himself with the Weasley girl. "A ploy worthy of any Slytherin."

Ginny's mouth fell open before she shared her gratitude. "Thank you, Sir."

"You may leave but for your evasion you will be in detention with me on Saturday. Your detentions will resume again after the Christmas holidays," Severus had things he wanted to do, and he waited for

the girl to go before he covered over Ginny's potion, and set a suspension spell over it to stop it spoiling, before leaving.

It was Christmas afternoon and Harry found himself sitting with Ginny; she was making him laugh with stories of what Charlie, who was unable to be there that Christmas, and Bill had done. Harry grinned at Ginny. "Didn't your Mum smack them for breaking the jug beyond repair?"

"She thought I'd done it," Ginny couldn't remember it happening but Charlie had told her about it. "And because I was only nine months old she put it down to accidental magic, and was rather proud of me."

Harry didn't know if he would have been able to lie to Molly Weasley so convincingly about how her favorite jug had been broken during an illicit session of target practice but he supposed the boys had expected to be punished. "I wonder if I did accidental magic when I was a baby."

"Probably," Ginny nodded knowledgeably, "since all magical children do."

Neville, who was sitting across from them playing chess, disagreed with Ginny. "I didn't. My Gran thought I was a squib. It took my Uncle dropping me from a window to find out that I was magical."

"You were dropped out of a window?" Harry could hardly believe it.

"It was unintentional," Neville blushed on his uncle's behalf. "He was hoping to frighten me into performing magic, and he slipped and let go."

"Yeah, Neville said he bounced down the street," Ron laughed at the thought of his friend's misfortune.

Harry, who'd been mistreated by his relatives, didn't find it quite so funny. "Ron, he could have been hurt."

"But he wasn't," Ron came back.

"At least I'm magical," Neville wasn't too upset by what had happened. "I think Gran was worried I wouldn't make it into Hogwarts."

"At least you knew about Hogwarts and magic," Harry countered. "I had no idea why the things I did happened."

Before the conversation could sink into melancholia, Molly ordered Ron and Neville into the kitchen. "It's time you two learnt how to bake a cake."

"What about Harry?" Ron protested.

"Harry can already do it," Molly had had Harry help her when he stayed with her during his recovery. "So move."

Grumbling, Ron got to his feet, and Neville joined him, leaving Harry alone with Ginny. Ginny decided to make the most of the opportunity. "Do you want to go for a walk outside?"

"It's a little cold, isn't it?" Harry didn't really want to move from the warm fire.

"There's a warming charm always in place around the house. Bill set up a ward so that we wouldn't have to keep casting spells," Ginny grabbed Harry's hand. "Come on."

A reluctant Harry let Ginny tug him outside. "I suppose I should walk off some of that dinner."

"Let's go this way," Ginny led Harry around to the side of the house where she knew that she wouldn't be seen. Then she stopped. "Harry, I have something to ask."

"What is it?" Harry expected Ginny to ask if she could loan his broom.

"I want to go out with you," Ginny's face exploded into a fierce red as she blurted out her desire.

Harry didn't want to hurt Ginny but he also didn't want to go out with her. "Ginny, I really like you but I don't think it would be a good idea."

Even though she knew that it was likely that Harry might turn her down, Ginny was still upset. "Why not?"

"Because I think you like me more because I'm the Boy Who Lived than because I'm Harry Potter," Harry answered honestly.

"I did used to like you because of that," Ginny admitted, "but I've gotten to know you now and I like you, not the boy in a story my Mum used to tell me."

Harry bit his lip. "I don't know, Ginny. I like being able to come here and visit, and if we went out and then split up, it would make things difficult."

"I promise not to make things difficult for you if that happens," Ginny pleaded with tears in her eyes.

Harry didn't like upsetting Ginny but he still couldn't say yes. His experience with Susan had taught him a few lessons. "Ginny, I like you, I really do, but not like that."

Ginny promptly burst into fully-fledged tears and ran off. Harry headed back to the house, and went in search of Molly. "Can I speak to you please?"

"Come with me," Molly glanced over at Ron and Neville. "Keep an eye on the timer." Molly also glanced at the family clock before leading Harry over to her favorite room in the house.

Harry followed Molly into her sewing room, and then waited until she had shut the door before blurting out his problem. "Ginny asked me out, and I said no, so she ran off."

"She's in her favorite spot, up in the large oak tree," Molly had had an extra hand fitted that told her when the members of her family were up in the tree; they all used it when they wanted to be alone. "So don't worry about her."

"She was crying," Harry was now feeling guilty but he also needed someone to talk to.

"She's idolized you ever since she was old enough to understand who the Boy Who Lived was, and I'm probably to blame because I'm

the one who romanticized you for her," Molly explained. "But I do know that she sees you a little differently now that she's gotten to know you better."

"That's what she said," Harry began to play with his sweater, a sign of his nerves. "And I do like her but only as a friend."

"I was once in love with a boy who was a little younger than me," Molly gave a small secretive smile. "This was before I fell for Arthur of course. I was absolutely infatuated, and I'd have done anything for him until he broke my heart when he said that we could never be together; that he didn't feel the same way about me as I did about him."

Harry was intrigued. "What happened?"

"I cried a lot but I got over it," Molly said gently, "and so will Ginny. Harry, you can't date someone if you don't like them that way; it would never work, and Ginny would be even more hurt when things went wrong."

"I love coming here, and I don't want things to be weird between us," Harry was now worried that that would happen anyway now that he'd said no to Ginny.

"Harry, you will always be welcome in my home," Molly put her arms around Harry and drew him against her ample bosom. "And I'll talk to Ginny."

Harry couldn't help but wonder whether this was how it felt to have a mother; to have someone to turn to who would hug you when you felt lost or miserable, but most of all just to make you feel loved. "I love you, Mrs. Weasley."

Molly's eyes immediately filled with tears at Harry's admission, and she crushed him even closer. "And I love you too, Harry."

"Hey, what's going on here?" A voice interrupted the couple.

Neither of them had heard a knock on the door but they both turned at the sound of the familiar voice. Molly let Harry go first, and he shot forward. "Charlie! I thought you weren't coming."

"Miss seeing you on Christmas Day?" Charlie grinned down at Harry as he hugged him. "Not a chance."

"How about a hug for your mother?" Molly held out her arms, and Charlie released Harry and went into them.

"I've missed you, Mum," Charlie breathed in the familiar scent of lemon that always seemed to envelop Molly's being.

"I've missed you as well," Molly now had to wipe away more tears.

Ron's yell broke the touching moment. "Mum, I think the cake is burning."

All three burst out laughing, and Harry stayed with Charlie while Molly headed back into the kitchen. "I sent your present to Romania."

"I got it this morning," Charlie held out his wrist. "A flame-proof watch; I didn't even know they made these things."

"Aunt Minnie helped me pick it out," Harry had been a little at a loss as to what to buy Charlie.

"She made a good choice," Charlie had a gift for Harry in his bag. "So what was going on that you needed to be closeted in here with Mum?"

Harry explained what had happened with Ginny. "I know she's your sister and everything, but I just like her being my friend."

"I understand," Charlie glanced out of the window towards the oak tree. "I'll tell Mum that I'll deal with Ginny."

Harry left the sewing room and joined Ron and Neville, who had now both been banished from the kitchen while Molly tried to clean up the mess, and he began a chess game against Ron.

Once outside, Charlie climbed up to the hidey-hole where he found Ginny still crying. "What's all this on Christmas Day?"

"Oh, Charlie!" Ginny almost knocked Charlie out of the tree when she leapt up and hurled herself at him.

"It's alright," Charlie soothed his little sister. "I'm here now."

Ginny began to tell Charlie what had happened. "I asked Harry out, and he doesn't like me."

"Harry likes you well enough but not in a romantic sense, Gin," Charlie said gently.

"But I told him that I liked him for himself and that it wouldn't matter if it didn't work out," Ginny sobbed pitifully. "And that he could still come here."

"Gin, do you really believe that if you went out with Harry and then he finished with you that you could deal with him being here?" Charlie knew Ginny too well.

"Yes," Ginny lied, then sobbed even harder. "No, but I really like him, Charlie."

"I know how that feels, Gin," Charlie wedged himself into the tree so that he could place Ginny on his lap.

"How?" In spite of her misery, Ginny was filled with curiosity.

"I like someone but I know she'll never date me," Charlie spoke quietly but loud enough for Ginny to hear him.

"Why ever not?" Ginny was surprised to hear that someone didn't want to date her beloved brother. "You're perfect."

"No, Gin, I'm not," Charlie ruffled Ginny's hair, "but thanks for saying that."

"So why doesn't she want to date you then?" Ginny laid her head against Charlie's shoulder.

"Because she thinks I'm too young, she doesn't want to ruin our friendship, and she believes I like someone else," Charlie answered his younger sister honestly.

"Do you like someone else?" Ginny asked.

Charlie shook his head. "No, I like her; I have for a long time."

Now Ginny was really curious. "Who is she?"

"My boss," Charlie revealed his secret crush. "And that also makes it difficult."

"Well I think she's an idiot," Ginny defended Charlie. "And she should go out with you."

"That's what I keep telling her but I can't make her change her mind just because I want it," Charlie hoped that Ginny was getting what he was trying to tell her.

Ginny wasn't stupid, and she gave a deep sigh. "You mean like me and Harry, don't you?"

"I do," Charlie sat Ginny up. "Gin, I've settled simply for being Tula's friend because that's all she's willing to offer me, and I'd rather have that than nothing. I know that if I push things with her, I could end up losing that."

"You want me to talk to Harry, don't you?" Ginny knew what Charlie was after. "And tell him that I'm happy to be his friend."

"If you think you can deal with that," Charlie responded.

"I'll do my best," Ginny wasn't happy about the situation though, and decided to talk to Tom later that night. Not wanting to dwell on Harry, she turned the subject back onto Charlie. "Charlie, who does Tula think you like?"

"Tonks," Charlie rolled his eyes. "She keeps saying we have unresolved issues."

"And do you like Tonks?" Ginny knew that Charlie would be honest with her.

"Not in a romantic sense, and I never will," Charlie liked Tonks in the same way that Harry liked Ginny.

"Darn it," Ginny remembered about the bet she'd made with her brothers and Harry. "I made a bet that you two did like each other, and that you would end up together."

"Sorry," Charlie shook his head and smiled. "But for me it would be like dating an annoying sister."

"Yuk!" Ginny grimaced. "I suppose I had better start saving my allowance – I'm going to owe eight sickles."

Sensing that his sister had recovered somewhat, Charlie kissed her on the forehead. "Come on. You need to talk to Harry."

Inside the house Harry glanced up from the chess game, where he'd just beaten Ron. "Ginny, hi."

"Can I talk to you alone?" Ginny asked, ignoring Ron's smirk.

"Of course," Harry got to his feet.

Molly nodded towards her sewing room. "You can talk in there."

Ginny followed Harry inside. "I'm sorry that I made you feel uncomfortable, and I'm happy just to be your friend."

Harry was thoroughly relieved to hear that. "I'm sorry that I can't be more."

"So we can just forget that I ever asked you out?" Ginny could only imagine if one of her brothers other than Charlie found out.

"I won't tell a soul," Harry promised, and then to stop any uncomfortable silence, he asked about Snape and the myriad of detentions Ginny had incurred recently. "Ginny, do you want me to talk to Aunt Minnie about Snape for you?"

Ginny immediately shook her head. "I quite like spending time with him."

Harry's mouth fell open. "You like spending time with Snape?"

"He's alright really," Ginny defended the potions teacher. "And he's been teaching me some of the third year potions."

"You don't have to scrub out cauldrons?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Only the one I've been using," Ginny knew what she'd told Harry was surprising. "But I don't want anyone else to know. They'd laugh at me."

Harry wasn't entirely sure that anyone would believe him if he did tell them. "I won't say a thing." He shook his head in amazement. "Snape being nice."

"I wouldn't go that far," Ginny giggled. "But he loves potions, and so do I."

Harry did as well but not when he was being taught by Snape. "Just as long as it doesn't bother you."

"It doesn't," Ginny leaned over and kissed Harry on the cheek. "I'm going to read for a while."

"I'll see you later then," Harry smiled, more than a little relieved that things weren't going to be awkward between him and Ginny.

Once upstairs in her room, Ginny opened up the diary.

On the way back to school, Harry was joined in the carriage he was sharing with Ron and Neville by Justin and Luna, and Hermione and George. Fred had already disappeared to sit with Angelina, Lee, and Beth, Lee's girlfriend. Ginny had stopped by to say hello but had then continued on to sit with Meredith.

Once the usual discussions about what the children had done during the holiday had been covered, the talk turned to Harry's ability. Luna had taken the time to research the ability, and was able to show Harry that while being a Parseltongue was linked with mostly dark wizards, there had been several quite prominent good wizards who could speak it. This made Harry feel somewhat better, and buoyed up, he enjoyed the trip back to school.

Harry's joy was to be short-lived, as less than two weeks after returning, Harry found himself in an argument with Susan. Although he had no wish to rekindle his original relationship with Susan, Harry had become pissed off at her ignoring him. He had therefore tried to

hand over the research that Luna had done. "See, I'm not evil, Susan."

"I didn't say you were," Susan, however, couldn't meet Harry's eyes, and although she took the list from Harry, she didn't look at it.

"You said I might be Slytherin's Heir, which is enough in itself," Harry took back the list which Susan refused to look at. "And you won't even look at this."

"I don't see why I should," Susan finally looked up at Harry. "It gives me the creeps, Harry, to know that you can talk to snakes. He can talk to snakes."

Harry gave up. "Just forget it. If you think I'm evil, then I must be evil."

"I didn't say that," Susan's voice rose.

"But you think I'm the Heir, don't you?" Harry bit out, feeling as though he was going round in circles.

"Yes," Susan answered honestly.

"And so do you think I killed Filch's cat?" Harry challenged.

"I don't know," Susan dropped her eyes. "You didn't like it."

"Nobody did," Harry snapped, starting to become more than a little frustrated.

"So you're not sorry it's dead, are you?" Susan's voice rose again.

"No," Harry had hated the mangy looking thing. "I'm not, but I didn't kill it."

Cedric, who had caught some of the conversation walked over. "Susan, I think you should back off. I believe Harry."

Susan didn't say anything, and walked away to sit by the fire. Harry experienced a small twinge of guilt at Cedric's defense of him, and he grabbed Cedric's arm before he could walk away. "Cedric, I have something to tell you."

"What is it?" Cedric asked curiously.

"I hated you when you caught the snitch to beat Ravenclaw. I kept imagining how many different ways you could be hurt so that I could maybe have a chance of getting back on the team," Harry owned up to the horrible thoughts that had gone through his mind. "I'm sorry."

"Harry, you were upset," Cedric didn't take Harry's words to heart, but he did wonder. "Do you still feel that way?"

"If I could kill you and take over your position I would," Harry teased, a big smile on his face, not realizing he was being listened to.

Cedric, whose back was turned so that he didn't see the girl behind him, joined in with the joke. "So if they find my body one day, they'll know who to blame."

"Yeah, me the big bad Heir," Harry grinned even more, glad to have gotten something that had been bothering him off his chest. "It's getting late. I'd better get to bed."

"Don't forget to keep those killing tendencies to yourself," Cedric slapped Harry on the back to show that there were no hard feelings, and walked off.

Neither boy knew their conversation would initially place Harry as the prime suspect in an incident that would occur shortly.

Harry had been having a fun time running interference for Justin, who had been practicing catching the snitch. He hadn't felt this good for a long time, and smiling, he, Justin, and Luna, who hadn't wanted to be parted from her boyfriend, all went back to school after they had finished.

Things deteriorated though from the moment he and Justin stepped inside the Hufflepuff common room to find Susan and quite a few other girls in tears. "What's going on?"

Hannah, who also had tears running down her cheeks, got to her feet, "As if you didn't know, Potter."

"Know what?" Harry was totally at a loss to why he was being attacked.

"Cedric's dead," Susan ground out. "He's dead."

Next Chapter: Justin defends Harry; the creature strikes again; Harry has a surprise visitor.

Chapter 28: A Gift of Justice

With so many accusing faces, Harry took a step backwards in shock. "You think I killed Cedric?"

"Well, who else would have done it?" Hannah snapped.

"Why would I kill him?" Harry's voice was shaking; he was pretty upset himself by the news.

Anna Jameson, a seventh year, got to her feet. "You were jealous because he made seeker, and so you used the creature to get back at him. You admitted you were the Heir. I heard you and Cedric talking."

Harry remembered what he'd said to Cedric a few days previously. "I was joking. Cedric knew that."

"Well, it didn't sound like a joke to me," Anna snarled, tears streaming down her face. "You said you'd kill him, and you did it just so that you could get back on the quidditch team."

"This is ridiculous," Justin barked out. "I've been with Harry all day."

"Then perhaps you're in on it," the girl sobbed. "Perhaps you both killed him."

One of the current seventh year prefects, James Marsters, decided that things had gone far enough. "That's enough, Anna. Harry is one of us, and you're attacking him."

"He's the Heir," the girl was now shrieking, "and he killed Ced."

Harry couldn't take it, and he turned on his heel and hurried out of the room. He was upset when Justin didn't follow, but he didn't know that Justin had stayed to defend him. Justin turned on the room. "You all make me sick. I admit that Harry was upset when Cedric made the team. But Harry liked Cedric. He would never have hurt him."

Anna exploded. "He fucking well admitted to being the Heir to Cedric the other night. Susan was in the room as well." She turned to Susan. "Tell him."

"Susan?" Justin questioned the redheaded girl.

"I...I..." Susan couldn't get her words out.

Anna therefore jumped back in. "We know Potter killed Cedric. How can you defend him?"

"Because I trust him, because he's my friend, and because he's a Hufflepuff," Justin didn't raise his voice as he listed the reasons why he didn't believe Anna's accusation. When no-one else defended Harry, Justin looked around in disgust. "Not that being a Hufflepuff counts for much right now. We're supposed to be the House that's loyal. What a joke! Right now I'd rather be in Slytherin." Several horrified gasps echoed in the room, and Justin backed up his announcement. "Yes, you heard me right, Slytherin! Because at least they would rally around their own, no matter what. You're all a bunch of hypocrites."

"Not all of us," Ginny stepped out from the dormitories, having caught the gist of what was going on. "I believe in Harry."

"As do I," James Marsters backed Harry. Several others also stepped forward, soon leaving a House divided.

"But not enough of you," Justin shook his head in abhorrence. "I'm going after my friend."

"I'll go with you," Ginny hurried out with Justin. "Do you know where he's gone?"

"I think so," Justin headed for the Runes classroom but he and Ginny didn't get there, for Harry, together with the Headmaster and Amelia Bones were coming towards them. Justin drew himself up. "Harry had nothing to do with Cedric's death. He's been with me all day long."

Amelia smiled at Justin. "I know he didn't have anything to do with it, Mr...?"

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," Justin provided the requisite information. "So if you know, then why is he with you?"

"Because we're on our way back to Hufflepuff to make an announcement, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. So if you and Miss Weasley would care to join us, I'd appreciate it," Amelia held out her hand indicating that Justin and Ginny should lead the way.

Ginny ignored the hand, and moved to stand next to Harry, slipping her hand into his. "I believe you."

Harry squeezed Ginny's hand, and smiled at his friend. "Thanks."

The group headed towards Hufflepuff. No-one said anything during the walk back, and again, when Harry entered Hufflepuff, you could have heard a pin drop. Susan got to her feet in shock. "Aunt Amy."

"Sit down, Susan," Amelia said firmly. "I have an announcement to make regarding Mr. Diggory."

"He did it," Anna was still rather distressed, and she pointed at Harry. "You've come to arrest him, haven't you?"

"I have not," Amelia's voice became firmer but also full of compassion. "I understand that you're grieving right now, and want someone to blame, but Mr. Potter is innocent."

Susan went white, but she said nothing, and her Aunt continued talking. "Cedric Diggory's death was from natural causes; his heart simply stopped."

Anna shook her head in disbelief. "No. That can't be right. He did it."

Normally Amelia would have kept information about a death private, but in this case it could only be beneficial to release the truth. "I've checked Cedric myself. There were absolutely no traces of any type of magical residue on Cedric, apart from what I'd expect to find during a normal school day. Also, no defensive spells had been cast by him."

"He didn't defend against Potter?" Anna's teeth were chattering.

"He didn't know he had to defend himself against anything, and especially not against Harry," Amelia said softly. "Cedric had a heart attack. It's unusual for a wizard I grant you, but his heart simply gave out."

Anna still wasn't about to accept Amelia's explanation. "But the creature that is in the Chamber; I know Potter released it to kill Cedric. Potter said he was the Heir and wanted to kill him."

Amelia turned to Harry. "Harry?"

Harry explained about the conversation he'd had with Cedric, and why he'd had it. "I felt awful about thinking such mean things about Cedric, and I just wanted to come clean. The stuff about the Heir was simply something to clear the air. Cedric knew it was just a joke."

Anna violently shook her head. "No, he's lying. Susan, tell them."

This time Susan had little choice but to admit that she had overheard the conversation. "Harry did say he was the big bad Heir, but I think he was joking."

"She's wrong," Anna began to get hysterical again. "You have to know it's the same thing that got out before and killed that girl, and that he let it out."

Albus took over, and like Amelia, he too made an unprecedented move in releasing information that would normally be kept quiet. "The girl who died the last time when the Chamber was believed to have been opened did not die from a heart attack. In fact she's been questioned but remembers little that can help us."

Ginny murmured something under her breath, and Albus nodded. "That is correct, Miss Weasley. Moaning Myrtle, as she is currently known, was once a Ravenclaw pupil named Myrtle Seaton, and it is she who died at the hands of the creature from the Chamber." Albus hesitated before making an apology. "I'm sorry, James, to bring this up but it is important."

James Marsters, who was actually a distant relative of Myrtle, nodded his approval. "It's alright, Sir."

"Thank you," Albus then continued. "We know that Cedric's death was entirely accidental because Myrtle's body was torn apart and her heart removed. Cedric's heart simply stopped beating."

Hands flew to mouths, and tears filled eyes again at Albus' announcement. It was too much for Anna, who, despite the age difference, had been Cedric's best friend, and she began to sob heavily, collapsing onto the floor. Albus walked over to her and knelt down, placing a hand on her shoulder, "I think it best if you go along to the hospital wing, my dear." Albus then rose up and turned to Joyce Kim, the other seventh year prefect. "Would you please escort Anna out?"

Joyce, together with James, each looped an arm around the distraught girl, and led her out of the common room.

Amelia again took over. "I understand that you all want someone to blame, but believe me there is no-one to accord any blame upon, especially not on Mr. Potter, and we expect you to treat him accordingly."

On that note, Amelia and Albus exited the common room. They still had a lot to do. Cedric's parents, who'd been informed of his death, were due to arrive at any moment, and Amelia knew them well, so she was going to sit in with Albus.

No-one would look at Harry after the two left, including Susan. Ginny gave Harry's hand one final squeeze before Harry walked back into his dormitory where Justin followed him. "It will die down, Harry."

"Not quickly enough," Harry felt exhausted, and he'd done absolutely nothing. "I just want it to end."

"I'm sure it will," Justin commiserated with Harry. "And things will get better."

Justin was wrong, however. Things were only going to get worse.

Harry left Pomona Sprout's office feeling more than a little torn. She had just offered to let him back on the quidditch team as a reserve now that Cedric was dead but Harry was not entirely sure it was a good idea. "I don't know, Justin. I really need to think about this. Everyone's going to think that I killed Cedric after all if they hear that I'm back on the team, and worse, that I'm going to be Vice Captain."

"Harry, I need you," Justin pleaded with his friend. "Now that Professor Sprout has made me Captain, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have as the Vice Captain than you."

"Don't you think it should go to Juliette?" Harry asked after Cedric's original choice for Vice Captain.

"She doesn't want it," Justin blushed. "I asked her first. I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want you to feel put out."

Harry was not the slightest bit offended. "It was only fair, Justin, and I still don't know if I'm going to rejoin the team."

"Please, Harry," Justin begged. "We need a decent reserve just in case I can't play, and we both know that it should be you in my spot anyway."

Harry caved in the light of his friend's pleading look. "Okay, but I don't want anyone to know until the next game."

Justin punched Harry lightly in the arm. "Thanks. But I'll have to tell the team."

"But that's it," Harry warned.

"I promise," a delighted Justin responded. "Let's go get some practice."

An hour later the two boys walked into the Hufflepuff common room to discover Susan weeping in Hannah's arms. Harry's heart sank. Justin stepped forward. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Justin," Susan gently tugged away from her friend. "It's Hermione and Luna."

"What's happened to them?" Harry broke in before Justin could ask.

"Colin Creevey found them outside the library," Susan wept. "They've been attacked."

"By who?" Harry's heart was now beating quickly.

"Harry! " a voice called out interrupting the discussion.

Harry turned around to see Pomona Sprout. "Susan just told us."

"Come with me," Pomona indicated the bedrooms.

Harry and Justin both followed their head of house into the bedroom, Justin not about to let his friend deal with this alone, and because he wanted to know what had happened to his girlfriend. Harry sat down on the bed. "What's happened?"

"Both Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger will be alright," was the first thing out of the teacher's mouth.

Harry and Justin both let out a sigh of relief, Harry looking pointedly at his teacher. "So who attacked them?"

"We don't know. We think it might be the creature from the Chamber as this has happened before," Pomona said gently. "You see they've both been petrified, and not attacked physically."

"Petrified?" Harry frowned as he asked.

"It's as if they're stone statues," Pomona explained. "They can't hear, see, or feel anything, and will be like that for some time to come. We've had them moved to the hospital wing, and have informed their parents."

"Why haven't they been cured?" Justin thought it rather odd that Madam Pomfrey couldn't help the girls.

"The cure is derived from Mandrakes, and they have to be grown," Pomona had some growing in one of the greenhouses. "A batch will be ready by June 30th."

"The end of June?" Harry spat out. "But what about their lessons?"

"The two girls will be able to take lessons during the summer to catch up," Pomona told the boys what had been decided.

Justin was rather despondent about the whole thing. "So Luna won't be able to come and stay with me, will she?"

"I'm afraid not, Justin," Pomona patted the boy's arm. "If you want to come with me, you can see both girls."

"We'd like that," Harry stood up and followed the teacher out.

When the two boys returned, it was obvious to both of them that Susan had been waiting for them. "Harry, I'm so very sorry. Can we possibly talk?"

Ginny, who had also been waiting for the boys to return with news, scowled at the girl. "You've got a nerve. You've bloody well ignored Harry all..."

"Ginny, it's alright," Harry stemmed the flow of angry words.

"So can we talk?" Susan asked hopefully.

"Yes," Harry wanted to put this whole horrible time behind him, and there was the only way he knew he could do that.

Harry followed Susan out of the common room. Neither of them said anything until they reached the Runes classroom that Harry favored. "So what do you want to talk about?"

Susan's stomach lurched nervously at Harry's hard voice. "I know now that you can't be the Heir."

"And how do you know that?" Harry's face didn't reveal what he was feeling.

This only made Susan more nervous. "Because you would never hurt Hermione or Luna. I'm sorry. I should have believed you."

"You should have," Harry agreed. "But you didn't."

"I made a mistake, Harry," Susan couldn't stop her voice from trembling. "Do you think we can make things like they were before?"

"Exactly what do you mean?" Harry didn't mean to sound so cold when he spoke, but Susan had hurt him a great deal.

"I'd like for us to be friends again," Susan met Harry's voice. "Please."

Harry knew what had driven Susan from him, and he brought this up. "How can we be friends again? Even though you know I'm not the Heir now, I still speak Parseltongue. I thought that made me evil."

Susan felt embarrassed. "I didn't say that you were evil, just that talking to snakes gave me the creeps because he can do it."

"And how do you know I won't turn out like You-Know-Who?" Harry challenged her.

Susan took a step backwards at the menace in Harry's voice before she realized that Harry was testing her. "I just know you won't, and I still want to be your friend." Susan lowered her head when she next spoke. "And, Harry, I want to be your girlfriend again."

Harry shook his head. "I can't, Susan. I thought you liked me, but you ran off when I spoke to that snake. And you accused me of killing that damned cat. And I'm pretty sure you thought I killed Cedric as well."

"I was afraid, and confused," Susan reached out to touch Harry but he stepped away from her. "I didn't really think you'd killed Cedric but I was scared by what you could do. I was afraid you'd become like him."

"So all of a sudden I'm not going to be?" Harry wasn't making it easy on Susan.

"No," Susan shook her head. "Please, Harry."

"But I can't trust you, Susan," Harry said in a sad voice. "When Nagini wrapped herself around me, you left me to face her on my own."

"I should have stayed but I was frightened, Harry," Susan started to cry.

"So was I, and I should imagine that Ron and his brothers, and Luna, and Hermione were as well," Harry listed some of the people who'd stood by him. "But they all stayed, and you didn't."

Susan started to cry harder. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I was afraid and I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I was stupid, and I'm sorry."

Harry hated seeing anyone so upset, and against his better judgment, he held out his arms to Susan, who flew into them. "Then I accept your apology."

Susan buried her face deeper in Harry's shoulder. "Thank you."

When her weeping began to abate, Harry stepped away. "We'd better get back to Hufflepuff."

"Does this mean that we can be friends again?" Susan asked tentatively, Harry not yet have answered her earlier question.

"Eventually we might be able to be but I need some time," Harry could see from Susan's expectant look that she was hoping for more, but he quickly disabused her of that idea. "But if it happens, then that's all."

Susan knew then that any chance of rekindling a relationship with Harry was over, but at that moment she was just grateful that he'd agreed to consider becoming her friend again. "I know."

"Good," Harry opened the door. "Go ahead, I'll be there shortly."

Susan headed out, leaving Harry alone behind. Harry closed and locked the door, before making his way to a sofa and dropping down onto it. Then he gave into his misery, and began to sob.

Minerva and Pomona heaved a sigh of relief when they unlocked the door to the Runes classroom. Susan had said she'd left him there, and Justin had confirmed that Harry liked to go there to think. "I think this Parseltongue business, Cedric's death, and now the attack on the girls have been too much for him. I'll take him back to my rooms."

Pomona concurred with Minerva's decision. "I think that's a good idea." She then left her colleague alone.

Minerva knelt down beside Harry before changing her mind about waking him. Instead she cast a spell that would make him sleep

even more deeply, and then she cast a second spell intending to levitate him to her rooms.

"I can apparate you both," Albus stepped into the room. "It will save any unwelcome questions."

"Thank you," Normally Minerva would have refused but circumstances dictated that she follow the sensible offer.

The room was left empty as the three of them vanished.

Harry woke up, and for a moment he didn't know where he was. Then he realized, and he spoke aloud to himself. "How did I get here?"

Having set up wards to alert her when Harry awoke, Minerva tapped on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Am I in trouble?" Harry blurted out.

"No, Harry, you're not but you did give us a scare yesterday," Minerva placed a tray of food that had a warming charm over it on Harry's lap. "Normally I'd expect you to brush your teeth first but..."

Harry turned pink. "I, err, need the bathroom."

Minerva's own cheeks also bloomed delicately, and she lifted the tray up. "Then off you go. But you're returning here."

Harry used the bathroom, and brushed his teeth before returning. "I've got to get into bed?"

"Yes," Minerva's voice was quite firm. "Justin told me that you haven't been sleeping well, and I've noticed your poor appetite, so I want you to eat as much as you can, and then sleep until dinner."

"What about lunch?" Harry speared a sausage with his fork.

"It's one o'clock in the afternoon, Harry," Minerva could see that she'd shocked Harry. "You needed the sleep."

"I must have done," Harry's stomach growled at him, reminding him to place the sausage in his mouth. Once he'd swallowed, he sighed

as he thought about his two friends. "Aunt Minnie, do you know what is in the Chamber?"

"No, Harry, I don't what is in the Chamber," Minerva answered truthfully. "But as you know, the Chamber was believed to have been opened almost 50 years ago with devastating consequences."

"Lockhart told us that the Chamber had been opened but not exactly what had happened," Harry reminded Minerva about the loose-lipped teacher, before going on. "It was the Headmaster who told us about Myrtle Seaton."

"I remember her well. I was a student here at the time," Minerva recalled the fear that had pervaded the school. "We were all worried the school would be closed but then the attacks stopped."

"Do you know why?" Harry sat up straight, interested in the tale.

"A student was accused of harboring the monster that set up the attacks," Minerva revealed. "And I know now that it wasn't him but we have no way of proving that."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked in an awed voice.

"He went to Azkaban for a while but he was released and found a job," Minerva smiled at Harry. "A job he's still in to this day."

Harry knew from her face that Minerva wouldn't tell him who it was, and so he didn't ask.

Minerva kept Harry with her for the weekend, before finally deciding to let him return to Hufflepuff. After searching for his friend, Harry couldn't find him, and was told by a second year to look in the dormitory. Justin wasn't there either but there was a big box of chocolate frogs, and a card on Harry's bed. Harry opened the card up.

'Dear Harry

We're very sorry that we didn't believe you, and we don't blame you for what happened to Cedric. We're also sorry for what happened to your friends. Justin was right. We were worse than Slytherin. We hope that you can forgive us.'

The card had been signed by everyone in Hufflepuff except for Anna Jameson, and Harry could feel tears welling up again. He spun around at a noise and found Justin standing there. "You told the whole of Hufflepuff that they were worse than Slytherin?"

"Yes, that night when Cedric died. They deserved it," Justin glanced behind him. "Harry, Anna Jameson is waiting outside. Can she come in?"

Harry was stunned to hear of his surprise visitor especially since she hadn't signed the card but he nodded. "Sure."

"I'll let her in and go," Justin went to head to open the door.

"I'd rather you stayed," Harry had no intention of being alone with the girl.

Justin therefore opened the door, and stood aside to let the waiting girl in. "Come in."

At Justin's bidding, Anna immediately walked into the room and up to Harry, before holding out a wrapped gift. "This is for you, Harry."

Harry took it gingerly. "What is it?"

"An apology," Anna tapped the box. "Open it. I promise there's nothing bad in there."

Harry opened it up to find a pair of antique diamond studded cufflinks. "These must be worth a fortune."

"They've been in my mother's family for generations," Anna explained. "They'll protect you against most poisons, just like a bezoar, and some spells, if you're wearing them."

Harry ran a finger over the cufflinks. "But why are you're giving them to me?"

Anna's face wore an apologetic look. "I'm giving them to you because I did you a great disservice, Harry, and my parents agreed with me. It is they who decided that I could make this gift."

Not having grown up in the wizarding world, Harry had no idea of pureblood customs. "I don't understand."

Anna explained. "It's a gift of justice. I could have ruined your reputation and standing in the wizarding world by making false accusations against you, and this gift is my penance for doing so."

Harry finally pegged that this was a pureblood ritual of some sort, and he'd insult Anna and her family if he refused the gift. "Thank you and I accept your gift."

Anna stepped forward and hugged him. "Should you ever need shelter, clothing or money, my family will always assist you."

Harry hugged her back, feeling a little uncomfortable at how closely he was being held by someone who a short time ago had believed him to be a killer. "Tell them thank you."

"I will," Anna then let Harry go and left.

Harry turned around to Justin. "Look at these."

Justin whistled when Harry showed him the cufflinks. "They're beautiful. You should put them on."

Harry glanced at his shirt. "I don't have holes for them."

"Harry, I wear magical cufflinks," Justin lifted up his arm to show his friend the gift his mother had somehow managed to order for him as a Christmas present. "Just place the end of the cufflink on your shirt sleeve next to the button."

Harry did as he was told, and the first cufflink slipped in place. "How did you find that out?"

"Mine came with instructions," Justin grinned as a knock sounded at the door. "That's probably Ginny."

"She can come in," Harry slid his sweater sleeve over the cufflinks.

Ginny shot in when Justin opened the door, hurling herself at Harry. "You're alright."

"I'm fine," Harry hugged Ginny, and then let go of her. "I just needed some time alone, and I fell asleep."

"Professor Sprout didn't think to tell anyone else in the house where you'd gone," Justin explained to Harry. "Just the boys in our room, and the prefects. And most people had gone to bed by then."

Harry wondered rather if it had been that most people hadn't cared, but he didn't labor the point. "Well, I'm okay now."

"I'm glad," Ginny remained standing close to Harry. "I was afraid that something had happened to you after Susan came back alone."

"I told her to come back here after we finished talking," Harry told the girl.

Ginny experienced a flash of jealousy. "Are you two dating again?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I think we might be able to become friends again someday but that's it."

Ginny commiserated with Harry. "I'm sorry that it didn't work out for you and Susan."

"I am too." Harry's tone was dismissive.

Ginny therefore decided that a change of subject was still in order. "What did Anna want?"

"She gave me a gift of justice for accusing me of killing Cedric," Harry shared what had happened. "And she said something about clothes and money, but I'm still not entirely sure what it all means."

"Basically she believes that she did you wrong, and her whole family have accepted the blame, hence the offer of shelter and all that," Ginny set out in layman's terms what the gift and offer meant. "The offer will remain valid for all generations to come."

"But she was just upset over Cedric's death," Harry protested. "I would never have blamed her for attacking me like that."

"It doesn't matter," Ginny sat down on Harry's bed. "Unless something major happens, such as she saves your life in battle or

something that drastic, you cannot rescind the gift now that it has been offered, nor the offer of shelter or money."

"But I'm never going to need the money," Harry sat down next to her. "And I own several houses."

Justin was shocked. "You never said you were rich."

"I've never really thought about it," Harry answered sheepishly, "and I don't get the main bulk of the houses and the money until I'm of age."

"But..." Justin sat down on his own bed.

"Everyone in the wizarding world knows that the Potters are wealthy," Ginny announced, revealing that she'd been aware of Harry's monetary status. "They're also titled, and have the right to take a seat on the Wizengamot."

Even Harry hadn't known that. "A seat on the Wizengamot?"

"Yes," Ginny was enjoying the attention, and so she continued. "Mum told me. Your family was one of the first to take a seat."

"That's quite something, Harry," Justin remarked. "Rich, famous, and titled."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose. Anyway, it's not as if you're not rich."

Justin blushed. "Not until I turn twenty-five I won't be, and even then the bulk of the money doesn't come to me until after Father dies or I marry and have a son of my own."

Both boys looked expectantly at Ginny, and Justin, who didn't really know her all that well, asked about her family. "Are there any titles we don't about for you or your family?"

Ginny shook her head. "No titles, no fame, and most definitely no money." She sighed. "Just lots and lots of homework, so I'd better go and get started on it."

"Thanks, Ginny," Harry smiled up at Ginny who'd stood up.

"You're welcome, Harry," Ginny reached into her pocket. "I have something for you as well."

"Chocolates?" Harry took the small see-through cloth parcel that had been tied with a bow.

"I thought you deserved something nice," Ginny kissed Harry's cheek. "See you later," Ginny hid her triumphant smile from the boys until after she'd closed the door, but her friend Meredith saw it. "What are you so happy about?"

"Just pleased that Harry is alright," Ginny told a partial truth.

"Oh good," Meredith didn't really care that much, and she grabbed Ginny's arm. "I'll walk you to Snape's office."

"Let me just get my things," Ginny headed into the dormitory and picked up her books, together with the diary.

Meredith continued on while Ginny headed into the potions lab where Severus was waiting for her. "Good evening, Sir."

"Miss Weasley," Severus nodded towards the board. "Your assignment is the one on the left."

Ginny began to set up what she needed. She could hardly believe that she had been awarded a scholarship to become a potions mistress. Albus had announced it over dinner at the end of the previous week. And to celebrate her parents had allowed her to buy a new cauldron, and a new wand.

But it wasn't just Ginny who was to receive a scholarship; any teacher could choose a pupil to nurture, and each head of house had done so. In a move that had surprised everyone, including Severus, Minerva had chosen Blaise Zabini – his transfiguration skills were exceptional, and Minerva hoped that one day the boy might follow in her footsteps. The diminutive head of Ravenclaw had picked a Hufflepuff, Meredith Harker, Ginny's best friend, to cultivate. And Pomona had taken on Neville Longbottom, whose skills in herbology would quickly rival her own, the boy having a natural affinity for plants. Ravenclaw saw two of their students go to Professor Sinistra and to Professor Vector, who initially chose Justin, but he turned him down.

Several days after her lesson with Severus, Ginny was sitting in the Hufflepuff common room late in the night when Harry came into the room. "What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," Harry yawned. "I keep thinking about what happened to the girls."

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," Ginny patted the sofa. "Now tell me. Did you eat all of the chocolates?"

"Yes," Harry didn't tell Ginny that he had thrown most of them away as they had tasted awful. "Was I supposed to save you one?"

"No, they were for you," Ginny smiled anxiously. "And what did you think of them?"

"They were nice," Harry responded politely but he could see that something was bothering Ginny. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all," Ginny got up. "I'm off to bed."

"Goodnight then," Harry thought Ginny's behavior a little off but said nothing.

Once inside her room, Ginny pulled her bed curtains around tightly and pulled out the diary, writing in it. "I gave Harry the chocolates, and he said he ate them but he still doesn't seem interested in me."

"Did you make the potion properly?" Tom asked.

"Yes," Ginny wrote back. "Professor Snape said it was adequate, which is pretty much praise from him."

"Then Harry must have taken something to counteract them," Tom deduced.

"Harry would never believe that I would feed him Amortentia," Ginny wrote down. "It has to be something else." Suddenly Ginny remembered Anna's gift, and she quickly scribbled down what had happened.

Tom thought over the problem for a few moments. "The gift must have been something to ward off potions or something similar. You'll have to find out what it is."

Ginny closed the diary. She was determined that Harry was going to be hers. Susan didn't deserve him; no-one did except for her.

Next Chapter: Ginny continues her pursuit of Harry; the Greenhouses are vandalized; Harry discovers who originally was supposed to have opened the Chamber.

Chapter 29: Mandrakes

George sighed heavily. "Why does it have to take so long for Mandrakes to mature? It's not the same without Hermione."

Harry scrunched up his face as he tried to remember what he'd read about the Mandrakes. "I can't remember what we did on Mandrakes."

"I know," Neville hurried to answer on something he knew about. "Mandrakes have to be grown in a particular environment, and they're really hard to bring to maturity. They need warm soil, regular feeding, and music. They also don't like climates that are too hot or too cold, and, no matter when or where they're grown, the first crop matures on the 31st of June and the later one on the 30th of August."

Harry then sort of remembered what he'd covered in class but still found himself having to ask, "Why not during the winter?"

"It's too cold for them," Neville said. "They hibernate and stop growing."

"Muggles have greenhouses," Justin informed Neville. "Can't they be grown in there?"

"Wizards have tried to grow them artificially but they die," Neville shrugged. "No-one knows why but they have to grow naturally. Hermione and Luna are going to have to wait until the crop that Professor Sprout is growing becomes mature enough to be harvested."

"At least they're going to be alright, unlike that Myrtle girl, their hearts weren't ripped out," Ginny said.

"Not helping, Gin," Ron scowled at his sister after watching George's face fall.

Harry shivered as he recalled what the creature from the Chamber had done to Myrtle Seaton. "I wonder why they weren't killed."

"Perhaps it isn't the same creature," Fred suggested.

"I've tried doing some research but I keep coming up blank," George sighed heavily yet again. "Perhaps Fred is right, and it isn't the same creature."

"Aunt Minnie said the same sort of thing happened when the Chamber was opened last time," Harry told him. "So I think it is the same creature hiding out somewhere. I just wish I knew where the Chamber was."

"Don't forget what Charlie said," Fred warned Harry. "No going after any big bad evil things."

"I'm not going after anything," Harry assured Fred. "I had enough scary adventures during my first year to last me a lifetime, thank you."

Ginny gave a shiver, and snuggled closer to Harry. "It makes me feel cold talking about it. Can we talk about something else?"

No-one got a chance to answer as Susan and Hannah Abbott walked over to the group, who were all trying to get closer to the fire in the Great Hall, which at the weekends became a meeting area between meals. "Do you mind if we sit on the couch with you, Justin? Everywhere else is full."

"Feel free," Justin patted the seat beside him. "We were just talking about Hermione and Luna, the Chamber, and what might be in there."

The subject matter made Hannah go red. "I'm sorry I thought it was you who opened it, Harry."

Harry had already told her that he'd forgiven her but every time she saw him, she still apologized. "Hannah, please stop saying you're sorry."

Fred agreed. "Harry's right. You need to put it behind you."

"It's pretty hard when I remember that Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood are up there frozen like that," Hannah said unhappily.

"You didn't do it, so stop feeling bad," Susan nudged her friend and sat down, turning her gaze to the fireplace. She wouldn't look at

Harry, for even though Harry was pretty friendly towards Hannah and the rest of Hufflepuff, things between her and Harry were still strained.

Before the talk could return to the Mandrakes and the petrified girls, Ginny reminded the group that she wanted to talk about something else. They therefore changed the subject to quidditch, something most of them were interested in, and they talked quietly until it was time for dinner.

31st March 1994

Harry struggled to contain his laughter. He'd already been warned by Madam Pomfrey twice, and she was going to kick him out of the ward the next time she heard him. "You really had celery growing out of your ears?"

Hannah wiped away her tears of mirth. "Yes, my little brother is most definitely going to be magical."

"It's a shame you won't be here when he starts school," Harry said ruefully. "The looks of shock on the first years' faces when the Hat speaks to them are hilarious. Could you imagine what would happen if the Sorting Hat frightened David enough so that he used accidental magic on it? Just think, it might end up having celery growing out of its mouth."

Hannah had to stuff a handkerchief into her mouth to muffle her scream of laughter at the thought of her little brother and the Hat. When she was finally able to pull it out, she stood up. "I think we'd better go before we get thrown out."

Harry walked over to where Luna and Hermione were both lying. "I'll see you both soon."

As she always did, Hannah leant over and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Bye, Sue. I'll be back after the Easter holidays."

Madam Pomfrey came over. "I'm afraid she won't be here then. Her Aunt has decided to move her, together with Miss Lovegood and Miss Granger, to St. Mungo's to the long term damage ward until they can be revived."

"But why can't they stay here?" Hannah asked in a worried voice.

"I'm not going to be here over the Easter holidays, just a trainee nurse will be," Poppy informed them. "So it has been decided that the girls should be moved to somewhere they can still be medically monitored by fully-qualified medical staff."

Harry glanced back at Hermione and Luna; he was going to miss his friends even though they couldn't talk to him. "Why won't you be here?"

Poppy told him, "I'm going to spend some time in the US with my husband and family."

Harry and Hannah were both shocked. "You're married?"

"I am, Harry," Poppy smiled at him. "My husband works for the Ministry but he spends a great deal of time overseas, and our two youngest daughters attend Salem Girls' Academy."

"Why don't they come here?" Hannah was interested in what the nurse had to say.

"Because my husband is American, and our children were the first girls to be born into his family for a very long time, and both sets of grandparents now live in Boston," Poppy gave a really big smile. "Also my eldest daughter has just given birth to my first grandson, and I want to spend some time with him."

Harry was surprised that Poppy had shared this much information with them. Over the course of the last few weeks the nurse had unbent enough to call him and Hannah by their first names but she was still usually rather reserved. Harry guessed quite correctly that Poppy had to be excited about her grandson to open up this much. "I really thought you lived here."

"Only during time term and when it's my turn to cover holidays," Poppy opened the door. "Now run along. You don't want to miss dinner."

"Have a good Easter," Hannah said politely.

"You too, Hannah," Poppy closed the door behind them before Harry could wish her the same.

"So have you decided what you are doing during Easter?" Hannah asked as they walked slowly down the corridor towards the stairs.

"I'm mostly going to be staying here with Aunt Minnie," Harry stopped at the top of the stairs, and cocked his head. "Did you hear something?"

"Nothing," Hannah also stood and listened. "I can't hear anything."

Neither could Harry when he listened again, and they began to walk downstairs. "So what are you doing over the holidays?"

"The usual," Hannah suddenly had an idea. "Harry, would you like to spend some time with me?" Hannah then went red. "Just as a friend, of course."

Harry rather liked Hannah, who had grown closer and closer to him since she'd first apologized to him for attacking him. "I would, but since the train leaves tomorrow, I guess it's too late now."

"Why don't you ask Professor Sprout?" Hannah suggested as they reached the Great Hall.

"She went home yesterday," Harry reminded Hannah. Then he clicked his fingers. "I'll ask Aunt Minnie."

Hannah sat down at the Hufflepuff table next to Harry, not noticing Ginny's annoyed look. "Will you ask her after dinner?"

"You can come with me," Harry offered, also not noticing his friend's annoyance.

Minerva was rather surprised to see Hannah with Harry. "Come in," Minerva stepped aside, and then closed the door. "Harry, you may make tea. Miss Abbott, I take it that Harry has told you of our relationship."

"A little, Professor" Hannah hovered nervously.

"You can sit down," Minerva invited.

"Thank you, Professor," Hannah didn't sit down straightaway though. "I know that Harry is supposed to be staying with you over Easter. Do you think if my parents say yes, he could spend some time with me instead?"

Minerva hid her delight that Harry finally seemed to be getting over the Susan debacle. "If Harry wishes to stay with you, then he may do so."

Hannah glanced towards the door where Harry had gone through. "May I?"

"Go ahead," Minerva took out her crocheting and began to finish off.

Harry was about to pick up the tea tray. "I don't need any help."

"Did you hear that I asked the Professor?" Hannah's cheeks were bright pink.

"Yes," Harry turned towards the door. "Hannah, are you sure really want me to stay with you?"

Hannah thought then that Harry had changed his mind. "You don't have to stay with me if you don't want to, particularly if you think it would cause problems with Ginny."

"We're just friends, Hannah," Harry began.

"I think she thinks differently," Hannah had been unable to miss some of the pointed looks Ginny had given Harry when he was with her.

"She knows that I don't feel like that about her," Harry dismissed Ginny as he remembered something else. "Darn it. I almost forgot that I'm supposed to be spending Good Friday here with Aunt Minnie. We're going to be transfiguring Easter eggs," Harry shared a smile with Minerva as he placed the tea tray on the table.

Hannah had never seen Minerva look so pleasantly at someone. "How about on the day after?"

"I'm spending the day with Charlie and the Weasleys," Harry said apologetically, all thoughts of what he'd got planned having flown out of his head at Hannah's offer. "But I'm free after that."

"We always go to our neighbors on Easter Sunday if you can join us that morning," Hannah responded in an excited voice. "We have a barbecue in the afternoon if the weather's good enough."

Harry was aware that Minerva was unlikely to say no. "Aunt Minnie, if Hannah's parents agree, may I go?"

"You may," Minerva poured out the tea. "There are some ginger newts in that tin, if you'd like one, Hannah."

The three of them then spent what to Hannah was a surprisingly nice time, before Harry and Hannah headed for their common room.

Once inside the room, Harry made a beeline for his friends, sitting between Justin and Ginny. "Hi."

"What have you been doing?" Ginny asked tightly.

"We had to see Aunt Minnie," Harry was excited and didn't notice Ginny's attitude. "I wanted to ask if I could spend some of the holidays with Hannah."

Ginny's heart lurched. "What about Charlie and dinner at our house?"

"I'm still going to do that as well," Harry confirmed.

Somewhat mollified, Ginny reached into her pocket. "I have another chocolate for you to eat at bedtime."

"I'm going to get fat eating these all the time," Harry came back at her, but he still pocketed the chocolate, not wanting to offend his friend. He didn't like to tell Ginny but the chocolates didn't exactly smell nice, and he had been throwing them away.

"Well, I think you look just right," Ginny cooed at Harry.

Justin looked over at Hannah to see a look of distaste cross her face. He nodded his head towards the door, got up, and Hannah followed him out. "You like Harry, don't you?"

Hannah didn't bother denying that she was attracted to Harry. "Yes, but I think that Ginny does as well."

Justin pulled a face. "I like Ginny but she's all wrong for Harry."

"And you think I'd be right?" Hannah asked in a hopeful voice.

"At least you don't sit making puppy dog eyes at him," Justin said in a disgusted voice. "I don't know how Harry puts up with it."

"He probably hasn't noticed," Hannah said. "And he thinks that Ginny only wants to be his friend."

"I think she wants more than that," Justin then grinned as he thought about Harry and the attention he was receiving. "How is it Harry is like a girl magnet? I mean Susan liked him, you like him, and Ginny likes him."

Hannah laughed. "He's hardly that. And I didn't even realize I liked him until a few days ago. I actually hated him when I thought he'd killed Cedric."

"So what made you change your mind?" Justin opened the door to an empty classroom.

"The same reason as Susan did; Harry would never have hurt Hermione and Luna," Hannah gave a rueful smile. "I was really horrible to him, and seeing how upset he was over Susan's attack, made me feel even worse."

"Why?" Justin led Hannah right to the back of the classroom.

"Because Susan told me what she and Harry had discussed, and she said that Harry was still willing to give her a chance to become his friend again, even after how she treated him," Hannah sat down in the window bay. "I'm not sure I would have done the same."

"Harry's a good sort," Justin thought the world of his friend. "And I can see why the Hat put him in Hufflepuff."

"So can I," Hannah tilted her head to look at Justin when a comfortable silence fell between the two friends. "Are you missing Luna? You don't seem to mention her that much."

"I did at first," Justin answered honestly. "But as time has gone by, I don't think about her as much as I did." He grimaced. "That sounds horrible, doesn't it? I mean I know you and Harry spend lots of time up in the infirmary and I don't."

"I miss Sue every day," Hannah was just as honest. "And I know Harry misses Hermione; he talks to her almost as much as George does."

"I used to talk to Hermione and Luna as well, but I ran out of things to say, so during the last few weeks I've pretty much stopped going," Justin felt guilty and it showed.

Hannah could see it. "Justin, you can't make yourself do something just because you feel bad about it. I bet Luna wouldn't like that."

"You're right," Justin didn't think that the girl would. "But it doesn't stop me feeling bad about not going."

"You won't have to worry about that soon. All the girls are going to be moved," Hannah finally remembered what the nurse had said.

"Where to?" Justin asked in surprise.

Hannah told her what Poppy had relayed. "So I won't be able to talk to Sue when I get back, and you won't have to feel bad about not talking to Luna or to Hermione."

"I suppose," Justin leant back against the window. "But what am I going to do when Luna wakes up? What if I can't find anything to talk about?"

"Do you still like her as a girlfriend?" Hannah asked hesitantly.

"I don't know. I used to like Cho," Justin smiled as Hannah grimaced; Cho wasn't exactly popular. "But then I noticed Luna, and with every day Cho seemed a little less attractive. But then this

happened, and now I'm not sure if I like Luna as much as I did. And I don't know what to do about it."

Hannah gently made a suggestion. "I think telling Luna how you feel would be a good start."

"But I don't know how I feel," Justin closed his eyes. "I really don't know."

Harry stood on the platform, Charlie at his side. "I don't see them."

"Harry!" Hannah burst through the crowd, panting heavily. "Sorry we're late. The traffic was horrible." It was then that she noticed Charlie.

Charlie held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Charlie Weasley."

"Hannah Abbott," Hannah shook Charlie's rather large hand. "Do you need to speak to Mum and Dad? They're coming behind me."

"I do," Charlie picked up Harry's bag and followed Hannah. They hadn't gotten far when a pretty blonde came towards him. "Is that your Mum?"

"Yeah," Hannah pointed to the sandy-haired man following her, carrying a small child. "And that's my Dad, and my brother David."

"I'm Tricia Abbott," Hannah's mother introduced herself properly. "And this is my husband, Michael."

Charlie introduced himself. "I'm Charlie Weasley. I've been taking care of Harry, and I wanted to make sure that he arrived safely."

"Are you a teacher?" Tricia asked with interest.

"No, Harry is sort of my charge," Charlie didn't really know how to describe his relationship with Harry.

"Is there anything we should know about Harry?" Michael butted in as he shifted his babbling son to his other hip. "Allergies, medications..."

Tricia grinned at her husband. "Michael's a doctor in case you can't guess."

"I don't like coffee," Harry finally said something. "Does that count?"

"Not really," Michael held out his hand. "Michael Abbott."

"Harry Potter," Harry was rather nervous about meeting Hannah's parents but he thought that Michael seemed nice enough.

"Well, Harry Potter, my car is on the meter. We should get going," Michael placed a hand at his wife's back. "It's the black Mercedes parked over there."

Harry took his bag from Charlie. "When will I see you next?"

"I really don't know but I expect it will be during the summer," Charlie gave Harry a brief hug. "Now don't forget to write to me."

"I won't," Harry promised. He then turned and followed Hannah to her parents' car.

During the holidays Harry found that Hannah's parents were as nice as she was, and he enjoyed his stay at their home even after David used accidental magic on him. Harry therefore decided that when he returned to school, if things were just as good between him and Hannah when they didn't have their friends in the hospital to focus on, he would ask her out.

20th April 1994

Harry entered the common room to find Ginny sitting in front of the fire. "What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," Ginny held up her book. "Potions problem. What about you?"

"I can't help thinking about Hannah," Harry flopped onto the sofa. "It's almost as if the creature is attacking everyone I care about."

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," Ginny said softly. "You couldn't have known that this was going to happen to Hannah."

"It's not fair. I had decided that I was going to ask her out just before this happened," Harry admitted, his voice quiet and his concentration on the fire. "And now I'm going to have to wait until she's unfrozen."

Harry's diverted attention meant that he missed Ginny's angry look. "You were going to ask Hannah out?"

"Yeah," Harry finally turned to look at Ginny, who had sounded rather strained. "Are you okay with that?"

"Of course," Ginny beamed at Harry. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just that after Christmas...", Harry went red. "Well, you know."

"That was months ago," Ginny abruptly got up and yawned. "I need to get some sleep."

"Goodnight then," Harry stayed by the fireplace, returning his gaze to the fire's flickering flames, and he barely noticed Ginny stand still for a moment looking at him before she left the common room.

Once she reached her dormitory, Ginny tugged the curtains around her bed, fuming silently, and pulled out the diary, and began writing. "What is it that Hannah has that I don't?"

"I have no idea," Tom wrote back. "I don't know Hannah."

"She's the girl that was petrified a few days ago," Ginny reminded Tom. "Harry just told me that he was going to ask her out."

"Of course, I almost forgot who she was," Tom lied.

"I hate her, and I'm glad that she was petrified," Ginny wrote back.

"So what are you going to do about Harry?" Tom asked, not wanting to waste time listening to Ginny's petty bitching. "You've been feeding him chocolates for a while now to no effect."

"I'm going to keep on trying," Ginny was not about to give up. "If I don't get him to go out with me before the end of June, then he'll ask Hannah out when she's woken up."

"Why don't you destroy the Mandrakes?" Tom suggested.

"I couldn't do that," Ginny immediately responded. "I'd get into trouble."

"Then you obviously don't want Harry that much," Tom responded.

"I do but I can't do that," Ginny sighed and wrote one final sentence. "I need to get some sleep."

When Ginny closed the diary, Tom mulled over the last few days. He could feel that Ginny was starting to fight back against his hold, and that wouldn't do. She had struggled against him when he had forced her to let Shakira out to kill Abbott - it was still beyond him how yet another of Potter's Muggleborn friends had managed to escape death. But escaped Muggleborns aside, with Ginny's growing reluctance, Tom knew that it was time for him to move on. There were still plenty of Muggleborns in the school to deal with, and he didn't believe that Ginny was going to be the one to help him deal with the problem.

1st June 1994

Pomona stood over her destroyed Mandrakes. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Someone who doesn't want the students revived," Albus looked on at the mess with dismay.

"But why?" Severus couldn't resist asking.

"Perhaps one of them saw something important," Minerva suggested.

"So why haven't they tried to kill them instead then?" Gilderoy asked. "It would be far more expedient than destroying a plant."

"You can't kill someone who is petrified," Albus explained patiently to a man he now realized was a complete fraud. "They are effectively suspended in time, and not even the killing curse can change that."

"And do you know what petrified them yet?" Severus wondered if the Headmaster had figured it out yet.

It turned out he had not. "I'm afraid not but there are many possibilities such as a Cockatrice, a form of Gorgon or a Basilisk. The list is endless."

Minerva's hand flew to her mouth in horror. "We have to close the school early. We can't risk another attack on a student."

"That won't be happening," a voice interrupted, and the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, joined the group of teachers. "I have been updated on the situation by Madam Bones, and I have decided to take action."

Albus knew immediately what Fudge meant by action. "Hagrid is innocent of any wrongdoing."

"I have little choice, Albus," Cornelius said in a voice meant to soothe but instead irritated. "He is being escorted to Azkaban as we speak."

"There was absolutely no proof that it was Hagrid's creature that attacked Myrtle Seaton," Minerva defended the groundskeeper.

"That may be so, but people are crying out for justice," Cornelius announced in a pompous voice, "and it is my duty to see that it is served."

And despite Albus' best efforts, the Minister for Magic refused to back down.

News quickly travelled through the school as to what had happened, eventually filtering down to Harry and his friends. Harry now knew who Minerva had been talking about when they had had their discussion after Hermione and Luna had been found petrified. "Hagrid is innocent."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

"Aunt Minnie said that someone had been blamed the first time the Chamber was opened, but that he hadn't done it. She also said that he was now in a job that he was still in to this day. It has to have been Hagrid she was talking about," Harry revealed what he had

discussed with his guardian. "And we have to do something to help him."

"Such as?" Justin was at a loss as to what they could.

"I don't know," Harry admitted he had no ideas. "But we have to do something. Hagrid's my friend."

"But you only see him because you go down to see Nagini," Ginny pointed out.

"No," Harry disagreed. "I was friends with Hagrid before then, and I used to see him at least once a month when I could."

"But still, as much as I hate to say it," George interrupted, liking Hagrid himself, "there's not a lot we can do."

"I'm going to see Aunt Minnie," a determined Harry said as he rose to his feet.

Twenty minutes later he was back, a dejected look on his face. "She's told me to leave it in the hands of the adults, and that Professor Dumbledore is doing everything he can."

"I just wish that he had done everything that he could to protect the Mandrakes," George's voice was more than a little bitter.

Hearing how miserable her brother sounded, Ginny was glad that she hadn't been the one to destroy the Mandrakes, and she wondered who had. But deep down she had to admit that she was glad that someone had done it. Hannah would now not be able to be revived until after the summer holidays, giving Ginny plenty of time to work on Harry when he came to stay with her family. She was hoping that she would find a way of circumventing the protection that the cufflinks, which she had managed to find out about, provided Harry. She wished she could talk to Tom about it, but Severus had confiscated the diary a few days after Tom had suggested she reveal him to the teacher. Ginny half-wondered if Severus had destroyed the Mandrakes but she instantly dismissed the thought.

The Next Day

At a hurriedly called teachers' conference, the teachers were discussing the problem that the attacks presented, Albus revealing what he had done. "I have decided we need to make safe the school. I've therefore asked Gringotts to send their best wardbreakers in to seal off the second floor for the time being as I believe the Chamber is located somewhere there, which means that we can at least complete the school year."

"That's all well and good for the children here but what about the children who have been petrified? They are going to be behind in their schooling," Pomona said anxiously.

"I believe that Miss Lovegood, Miss Abbott, and Miss Granger will be more than capable of catching up," Minerva said confidently. "But Miss Bones may well have to be kept back a year if her marks in her other subjects are the same as in my class."

"I agree," Albus nodded. "I have already reviewed the girls' academic records, and spoken with Filius about Miss Lovegood. She had already discussed with him her choices for third year, and I will therefore ensure that she joins those classes when she is ready to do so."

"And Miss Granger?" Minerva asked. "She was already taking far too many classes for her to catch up."

"I have also spoken with Amelia Bones, and she has said that Miss Granger may keep the time-turner for another year, and that she will provide Miss Lovegood with the same opportunity if she requires it. However, Amelia doesn't want her niece using such a device as she doesn't believe her grades are up to it, and Miss Abbott was far enough along in the school year to avoid taking extra classes," Albus could see that Minerva was pleased about Hermione. "But bear in mind that Miss Granger may have to drop some classes if she wishes to move on with her classmates."

"I'm sure she will do so," Minerva said confidently. "I'm aware that Miss Granger was not exactly enamored of either Divination or Care of Magical Creatures, and I doubt she would have a problem dropping Muggle studies."

"Then I'll put into motion what has been agreed," Albus told the teachers.

Ginny lay in bed thinking about the latest potion she was supposed to be doing a paper on. It was at times like this that she really missed Tom. Knowing that she would not be able to go back to sleep anytime soon, Ginny climbed out of bed, picked up the offending potions problem and her textbook, and headed into the common room. As usual, Harry was up, and he'd obviously been to bed first just as she had, for he was in his pajamas rather than his uniform.

Harry turned around. "Can't sleep as well?"

"Another potions problem," Ginny answered honestly.

"Can I help?" Harry offered.

"If you know how to brew an aging potion you can," Ginny answered eagerly. "I need to be able to break down the components and understand how they work. Usually I don't have a problem with this sort of thing but for some reason I'm having trouble with this one."

"I think I can help," Harry had just covered it in class, and he set about helping Ginny.

While Harry began to explain about some of the potion's aspects, Ginny delved into her pocket to search for her ink, only to come across a packet of the chocolates that she had decided to wait to use. But with Harry in pajamas, Ginny suspected that he wouldn't be wearing the cufflinks, and she decided to try now. "I have some more chocolates. Do you want one?"

"Thanks. I'll have it when I go to bed," Harry reluctantly took a chocolate. But unlike all the other chocolates Ginny had given him, this one smelt heavenly, and instead of pocketing as he had intended to, he popped it into his mouth instead.

Over the space of an hour, Ginny fed Harry three more chocolates, until eventually her extra homework assignment was complete. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry yawned widely. "That really helped to make me tired. I should be able to sleep now. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Ginny happily walked back to her room.

The next night, Ginny was once more joined by Harry. "Can't sleep again?"

"Not really," Harry blushed as he recalled why he couldn't sleep.

Ginny patted the seat next to her. "Why don't you sit down?"

Harry did as she suggested, before blurting out what was interrupting his sleep. "Ginny, I think I was wrong at Christmas."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"If you still want to be my girlfriend, I'd like that," Harry blushed again.

Ginny beamed at Harry. "I would, very much."

Harry moved a little closer, and brushed his lips over Ginny's.

Ginny's heart felt as though it was racing when Harry kissed her. It was just as she'd always dreamed; Harry was finally hers, even if it had taken a little artificial help to get him.

When they parted, Harry was smiling dreamily. "I think I love you."

Ginny was a little shocked at the suddenness of the declaration but she didn't show this. "I love you too, Harry."

Harry snuggled up against Ginny. "I wish I could spend all my time with you."

"You'd get bored with me," Ginny wrapped her arm around Harry's waist and laid her head on his chest.

"I'd never get bored with you," Harry tilted Ginny's head up and kissed her again. "I love you."

James Marsters managed to ruin it for Ginny when he walked into the common room, Joyce Kim right behind him. "That's very nice but you two should be in bed. I won't take points or assign a detention this time but don't let me catch you two like this again."

A reluctant Ginny got up and kissed Harry's cheek. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Ginny," Harry waved at Ginny, and then went to get up, only for James to stop him.

"Harry, I think there's something you should know," James knew that Harry had been worried about Hagrid as he'd overheard a conversation between him and Justin. "Hagrid is being released."

Harry's face lost its dreamy look, and he smiled widely. "Really?"

"Yes," James knew that his next piece of news wouldn't be so well received. "They found that kid who is always taking photos, Colin Creevey, on the second floor a few hours ago. He's been petrified. The Headmaster is going to ban anyone from going up onto the floor, and the school will close in three days' time."

"But there are wards on that floor," Harry reminded James of what had been announced when Albus had called in Gringotts' wardbreakers.

"Someone destroyed them," Joyce finally joined in the conversation. "And the school is therefore no longer deemed safe. All lessons have been cancelled and the train will be coming on Friday to take everyone home. It would have been here sooner but it's currently undergoing maintenance, and they're waiting for a new part."

"Does that mean I don't have to go to my detention with Lockhart on Thursday?" Harry asked hopefully, not that interested in the Express' current status.

"All detentions stand," Joyce said firmly. "Professor Lockhart will collect you from here."

Harry groaned. "Just my luck." Then he grinned. "So does this mean that Malfoy's detention with Professor McGonagall still stands as well?"

"It does," James had to refrain from smirking. He disliked the jumped-up Slytherin as much as Harry. "And the final quidditch match will also take place." The match had been postponed when

Cho Chang had been too upset to play after the death of her great-grandmother.

"Justin will be happy about that," Harry was pleased for his friend, who had done well in taking over from Cedric. "He's hoping that Ravenclaw will get slaughtered, giving us a chance at the Cup."

"As do we all," James pointed towards the bedroom wing when Harry yawned. "Now off to bed."

"Thanks for telling me about Hagrid, James," Harry thanked the prefect before heading off to bed.

James sat down in front of the fire, and brought up the subject he and Joyce had been discussing just before they'd entered the common room. "I still think you should have voted to drop the detentions."

Joyce was a great believer in discipline, and was something of a stickler for following the rules. "The pupils who have detention have done something wrong, and therefore need to be punished."

"I still think it was rather mean," James had voted to drop the detentions. "Not all of them deserve detention. Harry is a good kid, and from what I've heard Lockhart is always picking on him."

"Probably because he's done something wrong," Joyce, like most of the girls, still thought Lockhart was infallible.

James felt as though he was talking to a brick wall. "I'm not going to change your mind, am I?"

"No," Joyce smiled tightly. "I think I'm going to head off to bed. Goodnight, James."

After James wished her a goodnight, an unsuspecting Joyce headed for her dormitory, having no idea that her vote to uphold the detentions was going to cause untold misery for Harry's friends over the summer, to say nothing of what it was going to do to Harry.

Next Chapter: Ginny learns more of her scholarship; Justin fears for Harry.

Chapter 30: Dark Magic

June 15, 1994

Ginny finished the potion she had been assigned, and handed it over. Severus checked it over, and nodded satisfactorily. "You do seem to have the same affinity for potions that your trouble-making twin brothers have."

"I like it," Ginny then wanted to kick herself for saying something so obvious.

"I should hope so, otherwise I'm wasting my time, Ginny," Severus drawled. "Now I'll walk you back to Hufflepuff, and I'll collect you tomorrow night for your lesson."

Ginny smiled up at Severus. "Should I bring my Defense book as well?"

"No, I have something a little more advanced than that," Severus informed her, before escorting her back to her House. "Now run along, Ginny."

Ginny let herself into Hufflepuff house smiling. She could sometimes barely believe that Severus was so nice to her. Even though they spent a lot of time together because of her scholarship, it wasn't until a few months earlier that Severus had begun to get a little friendlier...

April 20, 1994

"Sir, can I talk to you about something before I leave?" Ginny nervously asked.

"Of course," Severus put down the quill he was using to list the homework for the next week.

"You remember the magical encyclopedia?" Ginny began hesitantly.

"I could hardly forget it seeing as it's responsible for your gaining this scholarship," Severus responded sarcastically. "Get to the point."

"It's called Tom," Ginny answered hurriedly, and fished in her bag for the diary, before handing it over to Severus. "I've been telling him about you and our lessons, and he said that he thinks you should know about him."

"How does it work?" Severus, of course, already knew but he had to keep up the pretence that he had no idea what the diary was.

"Just write something down, and he'll write back," Ginny hovered over Severus' desk.

"Sit down," Severus had no intention of letting Ginny see what he was writing.

Disappointed, Ginny did as she was told, surreptitiously trying to crane her neck to see what was written. She failed.

A short time later, Severus slipped the diary into his cloak. "I have decided that this is far too dangerous for you to keep."

Ginny's heart jumped in panic. "But it's mine."

"Where did you get it?" Severus asked, ignoring Ginny's outburst. "And I want the truth."

"I don't know," Ginny had to admit. "I found it in my book bag the same day my book bag broke and I dropped my books, when you were there. It must have been on the floor, and I accidentally picked it up."

"Or I did," Severus reminded Ginny of his help. "Do you realize that this book is likely something to do with Dark Magic?"

Ginny's eyes widened. "No, Sir."

"It reeks of it, and its loss may affect you," Severus told her truthfully. "So if you start to feel jumpy and angry, then come to me, not Madam Pomfrey. She won't be able to help you with this," Severus lied, as he rose to his feet and pulled out his wand. "My room is here."

Ginny watched a map appear in the air, and a door blink bright red. "What about if it's late?"

"I will give you a pass for curfew," Severus sat back down, and wrote one out on a sheet of paper. "Take this, and return to Hufflepuff. Even if it's the middle of the night, I still want you to come to me."

"Thank you, Sir," Ginny felt a wave of gratitude towards Severus, and she left the room.

Severus knew that it wouldn't be long before the girl came to him. She was in too deep to back out, and his Master had informed him that Ginny's talents would be wasted if he took her life, and that the diary should therefore be moved. Severus had no idea that it was really because Ginny was getting too difficult to handle. Either way, it meant that a new victim had to be found. The most vulnerable victim that both he and Tom could think of had therefore been agreed upon. And, less than an hour later, Severus had talked with Tom, and had then finished his task, the diary finding a new home.

Six hours later

Ginny couldn't take it any longer, and she slipped out of her room, still clad in her nightclothes, making her way stealthily along the corridor to the room that she had memorized from Severus' impromptu map. When she reached a large oak door, she knocked firmly on it, hoping that Severus would be inside.

It turned out he was, as a few moments later, Severus opened the door. He was, of course, totally unsurprised to see Ginny there. "Come with me."

Severus led Ginny to the seventh floor to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, and began to walk up and down in front of it. Suddenly a door appeared. "Go in."

Ginny entered the room to find a large comfortable sofa sitting in front of a blazing fire. "Why are we here, Sir?"

"Hold out your hands," Severus instructed, ignoring Ginny's question.

Ginny did as he said, her hands shaking violently. "I can't keep them still."

"It's withdrawal symptoms from my appropriation of the book, and they will only get worse," Severus warned as he placed his own wand into Ginny's right hand. "Cast this spell. It will make you feel a little better."

Ginny did as Severus instructed, and a black cloud appeared over their heads. "What now?"

"Use this spell," Severus told her another spell.

Ginny cast the second spell, and the cloud vanished. "What was that, and where are we?"

"Sit down, Ginny," Severus used Ginny's first name for the first time as he took back his wand. "I'll explain in a moment what that was."

"Thank you, Sir," Ginny sat down.

"I have a proposition for you, Ginny," Severus had talked in length with Tom about Ginny, before depositing the diary on its second victim.

"A proposition?" Ginny wrapped her robe more tightly around her.

Severus couldn't miss the jerky movement. "Not that sort of proposition, you idiot girl. The spell I just showed you was Dark Magic."

"But that's illegal!" Ginny blurted out, completely forgetting that Severus had said the same thing about the diary; something she had been using for months.

"Which is why I brought you here," Severus swept his hand to encompass the room. "This is the Room. What takes place in here is hidden from the rest of Hogwarts, including Dumbledore."

Ginny's nervousness exploded when she realized the lengths Severus was going to to hide their current discussion. "So why am I here?"

"Look at yourself," Severus passed Ginny a mirror that appeared out of thin air.

Ginny gasped at the black circle that ringed her brown eyes. Her friend Meredith had pointed it out before, and Ginny had scoffed at her, saying she was imagining it. "What is that?"

"The effects of Dark Magic, and it will only get worse" Severus vanished the mirror. "So I have a choice for you. You can tell Dumbledore what you've been doing with the book and go through withdrawal, or my proposition is that I will help you."

"Help me how?" Ginny wondered what Severus was going to do.

"I can help you allay the effects of the withdrawal," Severus said simply without going into detail.

Ginny didn't know if she would rather go down that path or suffer through the withdrawal. "If I went through with the withdrawal, what would it be like?"

"At the moment it's not too severe," Again Severus took Ginny's hands, which were still shaking slightly, even though the Dark Magic spell he had had her cast had alleviated the symptoms somewhat. "These shakes will get worse the longer you are parted from the book. Then an hour or so after these shakes spread to your entire body, your head will feel as if it's going to explode. In the final stages, your blood will feel as if it is boiling, and you will begin to vomit from the pain, all the time screaming from the pain. Then you will pass out." Severus didn't mention that a simple sleeping potion would have allowed Ginny to forgo all this, which was why he had stopped her from going to Madam Pomfrey, who would have known how to deal with the withdrawal.

Ginny was now terrified. "Can you stop it from happening? I don't think I want to go through withdrawal."

"I will," Severus confirmed, giving Ginny an uncharacteristically nice smile. "But in order to do so, you will need to cast some more spells for me."

"Dark Magic spells?" Ginny asked uncertainly.

"It's the only way," Severus said gently. "You've already cast one; another few won't hurt."

"But won't using that kind of magic make me evil?" Ginny remembered everything her parents had told her about Dark Magic.

"No, I use such spells all the time, and despite what everyone says about me," Severus revealed that he was well aware of the pupils' opinion of him, "I'm not evil, and neither will you be."

Ginny had no idea that Severus was lying. The use of Dark Magic did exactly as her parents had told her it would; it would take her, and twist her into someone she didn't recognize. "What do I have to do?"

"First of all, I will need for you to swear an oath to keep this between us," Severus believed in protecting himself. "And then I will teach you a few spells which will, as I said, alleviate the withdrawal."

Ginny noticed a flaw in the solution. "But won't I have to keep using spells to stop going into withdrawal again?"

"You will," Severus confirmed. "The only way to truly overcome withdrawal is to fully embrace Dark Magic."

"Fully?" Ginny wasn't sure now what frightened her most, the thought of doing Dark Magic, or the possibility of withdrawal.

"It's the only way," Severus patted Ginny's hand. "Don't look so scared. I won't be teaching you anything like the Unforgivable Curses."

"What would you be teaching me?" Ginny asked, more than a little nervous.

"I'll stick to some simple Dark Magic spells, such as one that turns gloves inside out," Severus watched a disbelieving look creep over Ginny's face.

"Gloves and Dark Magic?" Ginny wasn't sure if Severus was toying with her.

"The spell was classed as Dark Magic when a glover was accidentally turned inside out when he got in the way of a spell," Severus explained.

Ginny pulled a face. "Did he die?"

"No, his apprentice used the spell on him again, and saved him," Severus had been fascinated when he'd first learned about the spell, and, like Ginny, had been more than a little incredulous. "There are quite a few innocuous spells like that, and we will stick to using those."

"Okay," Ginny agreed, feeling a little more comfortable now about using Dark Magic. "I'm willing to use a spell like that if it wasn't meant to hurt anyone."

"It wasn't," Severus assured her. "Now, during the evenings we will come here, and you will cast some spells. Your eyes will eventually turn fully black, and they'll take an hour or so to revert to your normal brown color when this happens. After that time you can leave to return to your house. I will know when you've fully embraced Dark Magic as your eyes will no longer turn black after casting such spells. Only then will you be able to deal with such things as dark as the book you've been using."

Ginny didn't once question why an authority figure would even consider handing back something so awful as a Dark Magic book; all she wanted was her friend back. "I really would like it back. I miss Tom already and it's only been a few hours."

"I will return it at the end of the year if you prove you can deal with Dark Magic," Severus lied.

Ginny hated that she was going to lose her confidante but she had little choice; she couldn't go through withdrawal and she really did want Tom back, so she nodded. "Okay, so when do we start?"

"Right now is as good a time as any, and so..." And Severus began to explain the glover spell that Ginny was to learn.

Present time - June 16, 1994

It was almost midnight when Severus decided that it was far too late for their lesson to continue. "I think it's time to end things."

"Just one more spell, please," Ginny pleaded, now able to cast spells without any side effects.

For a moment Severus was transported back into the past, where another redhead had begged him for the same thing, before he snapped back into the present. "I said enough. I will take you back to Hufflepuff, and collect you tomorrow to spend the day making potions."

Ginny accepted Severus' decision. "Okay, but does it have to be all day?"

"Potter will still be there at the end of the day," Severus ground out, well aware of why Ginny had asked. "So yes."

"Alright," Ginny sighed and began to collect up her books and cauldron. "Will I be able to do a few spells as well?"

"Of course," Severus knew full well that after two months Ginny was completely hooked, and, that like an addict, she had to get her fix every day, allowing him to teach her darker and darker spells.

"You were right about Dark Magic not turning me evil," Ginny gave a little smile. "That was really silly of me to believe that, wasn't it?"

"It was," Severus agreed, knowing full well that Ginny was wrong.

"I mean, I'd never do anything to hurt anyone," Ginny threw her book bag over her shoulder.

"I'm sure you wouldn't," Severus responded shortly. "Now we really need to get you back to your house."

The two of them left the Room, and Ginny was delivered to her house. Once inside the common room, Ginny was surprised to find Harry still up. "Harry, I thought you would have gone to bed."

"I couldn't go to sleep without kissing my favorite girl goodnight," Harry tugged Ginny towards him and started kissing her.

As she kissed him back, Ginny had no idea that her reluctance to use a potion on Harry had only broken down because of using Dark Magic. Without realizing it, she had begun to hurt someone the moment she had tried to feed Harry his first chocolate, and just as Severus had known it would, Dark Magic had begun to change her.

Back at the Room, Severus found himself lost in thought about Ginny and her constant demands to let her do more and more magic. She had reminded him of Lily, and her demands of him to show her another spell when she had first discovered what Severus could do.

When he came back to himself, Severus found that his thoughts had caused the room to change, becoming a very familiar park. On seeing what he had done, Severus shook himself, and the room reverted back to a potions lab. Severus started to collect his things, only to realize that his mind had wandered yet again, and once more the room had become a park. Snarling, Severus refocused his thoughts, and the room changed yet again, and Severus left it to head back to his rooms.

As he reached his rooms, Severus found that he was shaking. He hadn't thought about Lily in some time but with what was due to happen the next day, it was hard to ignore thoughts of her and the past. Picking up a potions journal, Severus tried to focus on a piece by his former mentor, but try as he might, he couldn't tear his thoughts away from Lily; for focusing on her had brought up a question that wouldn't go away, a question he intended to ask Ginny the very next day.

The next evening

Severus had put off asking Ginny about what had been plaguing his thoughts all night and day. But time was running out, and in the end he finally asked. "I expected you to go into Gryffindor like the rest of your family. Do you know why the Hat placed you in Hufflepuff?"

A little surprised by the suddenness of the question, Ginny glanced up from the sleeping potion she was making, but she still answered the question. "Yes, I was supposed to be in Gryffindor but I asked the Hat to let me go into Hufflepuff instead."

Severus couldn't believe it had been that easy. "And it simply let you?"

Ginny let three drops of lavender fall into the potion before responding. "Yes, after I pointed out that the Hat had let Bill do the same thing when he didn't want to go into Slytherin." Ginny blushed when she realized what she had just said. "Sorry."

"That's quite alright," Severus brushed off Ginny's apology. "So why did you ask it to let you go into Hufflepuff? Most students don't want to go into that house anymore than they want to go into mine."

Ginny stirred the potion but didn't look at Severus. "I wanted to be in Harry's house."

Severus felt a sharp pang of hatred for both the object that was usually innate and for Potter. "What do you see in that boy?"

"Mum told me stories about him when I was growing up, and as I got older, I imagined what it would be like to be his girlfriend," Ginny's face turned a fiery red. "And now I am."

"I'm sure you could have made a better choice," Severus shook his head in disgust. "Show me the potion."

Ginny didn't understand why Severus hated Harry, and she didn't ask. Instead she handed over the completed potion, cleaning up when told to do so. "Is that all?"

It wasn't. Severus had something he needed to discuss before Ginny left to go home. "No. I thought you might like to know that during the holidays you will be accompanying me to San Francisco for two weeks."

"San Francisco in America?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"No, San Francisco in London," Severus responded acerbically. "There is a potions conference taking place there, and I believe it will benefit you to attend. Some of the lectures are specifically geared towards trainees, and you will be attending those."

"But I can't afford it," Ginny pointed out before she could become too excited.

"The cost is included in your scholarship," Severus had already checked with Albus, before booking Ginny onto the course. "And your parents have given permission for you to attend."

Ginny was delighted. "What do I need to take with me?"

"Your mother has been provided with a list," Severus informed her, "as well as with funds."

"When are we going, and how will we get there?" Ginny asked excitedly.

"The last two weeks of August, and we will be travelling via international portkey," Severus watched as Ginny's face dropped. "Is something wrong?"

"I was supposed to be attending the Quidditch World Cup," Ginny had already agreed to go with Harry and her family.

"Then the Cup will continue without you," Severus picked up his cloak, "unless you want to drop the scholarship of course."

"No, of course not," Ginny hurriedly told him, as something occurred to her. "Am I supposed to practice my spells during the holidays?"

"Unless you want to go into withdrawal, I thoroughly recommend it, and I think it's time we left," When they arrived at Hufflepuff, Severus pointed at the entrance. "I will collect you on August 15th. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Sir," Ginny responded, and headed into the common room. But unlike the previous night, Harry was nowhere to be seen. Resigning herself to having to see him in the morning, she headed off to bed.

Instead of heading back to his rooms as he intended, Severus found himself heading back to the Room. Like the previous evening, he felt angry and could think about little else but the Sorting Hat and Lily. But when he reached the Room, unlike the previous evening when it had changed and Severus had fought against it, this time he gave in, slumping onto a carriage seat as a familiar train appeared. And, tired of fighting his memories, Severus let them simply wash over him.

September 1, 1971

Lily Evans slammed the carriage door shut. "Just who does that jumped up little prat think he is?"

Severus shrugged, and put away his wand. "His family is really old. I suppose he thinks that gives him and his friends the right to pick on people like us."

"People like us?" Lily sat down beside Severus. "What do you mean?"

Severus had never really discussed blood purity with Lily before, the subject never really coming up with the two children sticking to more fun topics. Severus therefore began to do so now, his Great Uncle having told him in great detail about other wizarding families and their beliefs. "Because you're from non-magical parents, you're what is called a Muggleborn, and because my Mum is a pureblood witch and Dad is a Muggle, I'm a half-blood. That boy with the glasses is a pureblood, meaning he has two magical parents who are also purebloods, and the one with black hair is a pureblood as well. I didn't recognize the other two boys - they may well be purebloods from a lesser family."

"But being purebloods doesn't mean that they're any better than us," Lily snapped, still angry from the encounter with the boys who'd interrupted her and Severus' discussion. "We can all do magic."

Severus could see that Lily was really mad. "I know but we still aren't considered as good as them."

"You beat them though," Lily proudly pointed out, Severus having disarmed the ringleaders before they could do anything, "so that must mean you're better than they are."

Severus was happy that Lily thought so. "They'll never believe that."

"Well, I don't care what those stuck-up idiots think," Lily said as she slipped her arm through Severus'. "We'll show them."

"We will," Severus agreed with his friend.

A thought occurred to Lily. "I hope I don't end up in the same house as them."

"Potter, the boy with glasses, has to be in Gryffindor," Severus remarked. "All the Potters have been, and Black will probably end up in Slytherin."

"Then I want to be in anything but those houses," Lily responded.

"My Mum was in Slytherin," Severus warned Lily that he might end up in the same house as one of the boys, "so I may end up there."

"Then I want to be in Slytherin as well, even if it means being in the same house as Black," Lily declared, having no idea that people like her didn't make that house.

Severus did, however, but he didn't want to upset Lily. "Perhaps we'll both be in Ravenclaw. Uncle Dominus was in that house."

"Then we'll both ask to be in Ravenclaw," Lily decided. "Then we won't have to be in the same house as either of them."

"Agreed," Severus said, but like all the first years, he really had no idea of what happened during the sorting.

Both he and Lily were shortly to find out. After alighting at Hogsmeade, they made their way to the boats, sharing a boat with a short, brown-haired girl who introduced herself as Alice Baxter, and a stocky young man who declared himself to be Frank Longbottom.

Once inside the school, after waiting for a short time in an ante-chamber, the children were shepherded into the Great Hall. Lily gasped out loud. "It's amazing."

Even though Severus had passed on what his mother had told him about Hogwarts to Lily, he too was taken aback by the grandeur and scale of the Great Hall. "It's bigger than I thought it would be."

The two of them were hushed by a teacher, and they fell silent. Both were confused when a stool and a ropey looking hat were deposited

at the front of the Hall. And both were surprised when a rip in the hat's mouth opened and it began to sing.

"Here we are again, all friends together, For only as one will the storm we weather, So no matter what house in which you reside, Your hatred and fears must be put aside, So come together one and all, Or else our world may well fall."

The Hall exploded into worried voices when the strange looking hat stopped singing. Severus and Lily both had no idea that this unusual hat normally sang about the different houses and their singular qualities, but this time it had foregone such a song in favor of unification.

Even as young as she was, and although she was new to this world, Lily still managed to discern that something was amiss. "What was that about?"

Severus shrugged. "No idea."

All talk ended as the Deputy Headmistress began to read names from the list she had. Lily waited with baited breath as several children were sorted. Alice Baxter, who had ridden over in the boat with her, was sorted into Gryffindor, and then came the turn of Sirius Black. Lily didn't understand why gasps came from both Slytherin and Gryffindor at Sirius Black's sorting into Gryffindor. She was just glad that Severus had been wrong about Black's house. Now, she and Severus had three houses they could possibly go into, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw. All too soon it was Lily's turn.

When her name was called, Lily carefully climbed onto the stool, and slipped the hat onto her head, her heart skipping a beat when she heard a voice tell her that it could hear her thoughts and that she only had to think her responses. So Lily thought to the hat. "I want to be in Ravenclaw."

"How do you know that you're smart enough to be in that house?" the Hat questioned Lily.

Lily frowned, her brow crinkling, giving her a serious look. "I do well at school."

"But this is very different from what you're used to," the Hat responded. "Now, let me see your thoughts. You're brave and determined, Gryffindor traits."

"I don't want to go into that house," Lily interrupted.

"Let me finish looking, child," the Hat admonished. "And you're extremely loyal and hardworking, excellent Hufflepuff traits. As you've pointed out, you did do well at school, so you're not lacking in brains, meaning that Ravenclaw can't be ruled out."

Lily's hopes rose, and she mentioned the only house that the Hat hadn't mentioned. "What about Slytherin?"

If the Hat had had a head to shake it would have done so. "That house is not for you, which leaves just three. Hmm."

"Please not Gryffindor," Lily whispered in her head. "Not Gryffindor."

The Hat ignored her as he debated the options. "I think that Hufflepuff wouldn't meet your needs, which leaves Ravenclaw and Gryffindor."

"I don't want to go into Gryffindor," Lily snapped in her head. "That pig Potter will probably be in it."

"Quite likely," the Hat admitted. "All of his family has been for generations."

"So which house are you going to choose?" Lily was getting annoyed with the Hat, and it showed in her thoughts, which were beginning to get a little bossy, worry driving her to anger. "Everyone's staring at me."

The Hat didn't like being snapped at. "Ravenclaw are studious, respectful and quiet, something you are not."

"I am studious," Lily resented the Hat's comment. "And I'm very respectful." And as an afterthought, Lily added, "and quiet".

The Hat, who could see all of Lily's thoughts, didn't believe her about the quiet. "Huh! I'd like a little quiet right now."

Lily simmered down, but she didn't shut up. "Have you decided yet?"

"GRYFFINDOR" the Hat screamed out.

"Thanks for nothing," Lily thought to the Hat, before ripping it off her head, dropping it unceremoniously onto the stool, and stomping off to join the new arrivals at Gryffindor. She ignored Sirius who winked at her, and sat down next to Alice.

Standing in line, Severus was filled with despondency. He knew that he wasn't Gryffindor material. He wasn't brave enough. He'd lost count of the times his father had beaten his mother, and he'd just cowered in the corner in tears, not once trying to step in and help her. Severus' misery was expounded when one of the boys who had been with Black and Potter, a Remus Lupin, joined Black in Gryffindor, as did the other boy who'd hung back during the altercation on the train, who turned out to be named Peter Pettigrew. Then, as expected, James Potter also became a member of Gryffindor. And now it was finally Severus' turn.

After sitting down on the stool, Severus miserably slipped the Hat onto his head. He didn't even flinch when it spoke to him.

The Hat studied Severus carefully. "Someone's been dabbling where they shouldn't have."

"What do you mean?" Severus questioned the Hat.

"You know some very dark spells for a child of your age," the Hat remarked sternly.

"My Uncle taught me them," Severus didn't hide how he knew them, and he was afraid of what the Hat would do. "But I haven't used any of them."

"I can see that," the Hat revealed. "I can also see that you wanted to be placed with Lily Evans."

"She's my best friend," Severus informed the Hat.

"I saw that from her mind," the Hat sighed. "And I know you'd like to go into Gryffindor with Miss Evans but I'm afraid there's only one house I'd consider suitable for you."

"You mean Slytherin, don't you?" Severus voiced his own suspicion.

"I do," the Hat responded in a gentle voice, before screaming out a response everyone could hear. "SLYTHERIN."

All conversation ended, and Severus slipped off the stool. When he sat down, a blonde boy he knew was a Malfoy, patted him on the shoulder and welcomed him to the house. Severus was grateful for his kindness but he still wished he could be sitting with his friend, even if meant having to be in the same house as that hateful James Potter and Sirius Black. After catching Lily's miserable look, Severus vowed there and then that nothing would come between the two of them, nothing at all.

Present Time

"But I let my desires come between us, didn't I?" Severus murmured softly, before slowly rising from the carriage seat, the image of the Express vanishing, and a graveyard taking its place.

A tall marble stone building stood in front of Severus. Albus had taken him to it so that Severus could pay his last respects, and he had only been there once, almost a year after Lily had been buried. But even so, Severus knew exactly where to go, and he entered the building, walking directly to where a large stone topped a sarcophagus.

Placing his hand on it, Severus ran a finger over the third name inscribed into the stone, 'Lily Phoebe Evans Potter'. "I should have tried harder to bargain with the damned Hat like you did, rather than simply accepting my fate. Your precious son's girlfriend got it to change its mind, just because she fancied him. Why wouldn't it do it for us? We were best friends, and we should have been together, and you shouldn't be here with them."

Severus' eyes moved up the large stone to where the names 'James Edward Potter', and 'Jamie Patrick Potter' were inscribed. "Why him, Lily? Why Potter of all people?" Not wanting to think about Lily being together with James Potter, Severus' eyes returned to look down the stone until it reached a blank area. After running his finger over the

blank, he touched it with his wand, and the name 'Harry James Potter' appeared. As much as Severus had loved Lily, he hated Harry, and a satisfied smile appeared on Severus' tortured face as he looked down at the newly inscribed name. "Tonight, Potter, for you it all ends tonight."

Next Chapter: The diary is destroyed.

Chapter 31: Resurrection

It was after three in the morning when Severus opened his door to the persistent rapping. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

"It's about time," the dark-haired young man in the Slytherin uniform said as he pushed past Severus.

Severus gaped in shock. Although he had known that there was a good chance that their plan would work, for some reason he had still expected to see Voldemort, and not this much younger version of the man. And he certainly hadn't expected to see him standing resurrected at his door. "My Lord?"

"No, it's Harry Potter," Tom responded sarcastically, before going on. "Actually, I doubt you're ever likely to see Potter again."

"You killed him?" Severus asked, glee lighting up his features.

"Not personally no. But he was trapped behind or under a rock fall as far as I know, and if the rocks didn't get him, then Shakira will," Tom sat down without being invited, and asked a question. "Do you have any tea?"

"I'll make some," Severus went into the kitchenette that all the teachers had in their rooms, and tapped on his teapot, before putting out two cups, and filling them with the tea and taking them into his sitting area. "Milk or sugar?"

"I would like milk if you have it," Tom shuddered at the thought of tea without milk.

Severus walked back out and returned with a jug of the liquid. "What happened to Lockhart?"

"Dead, of course," Tom put a large splash of milk into his tea, before taking a sip of the light brown liquid. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to be able to taste something again?"

"I can only guess, my Lord," Severus responded politely.

"First of all, when we are together you can start by calling me Tom," Tom could see that he had surprised Severus. "At least until I find a more suitable name."

"You won't be using Lord Voldemort?" Severus asked.

Tom took another large mouthful of tea. "Absolutely not. After what I've discovered about him, I have no wish for anyone to confuse me with my failure of a predecessor."

"You aren't going to search him out?" Severus asked in shock.

"Of course I am, Severus," Tom gave a tiny, but evil-filled smile. "You can count on it."

Severus felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The young man sitting in front of him looked harmless but Severus was more than aware of what he had done to Myrtle Seaton in order to get into the diary in the first place, and of what he must have done to Lockhart. "So how did Potter take it when he found out about you?"

"He didn't get to find out," Tom took another mouthful of tea, relishing the tangy taste of it. "The rock fall happened before I could complete the transformation, trapping Potter behind it, and Lockhart's lower half beneath it."

"So Lockhart survived the rock fall?" Severus asked.

"Long enough to provide me with the life essence I needed to escape the diary, otherwise I wouldn't be here now," Tom's face showed his revulsion as he thought about the deceased teacher. "And it's a good thing he's dead already, otherwise I would have had to kill him just for putting me through the agonies of listening to his whining about his clothes, his fans, and his next book."

"His next book?" Severus couldn't help but ask.

"His experiences as a teacher," Tom laughed sardonically. "If you could call him that. But enough about that fool, I have more important things to deal with."

"My L... Tom," Severus quickly changed his form of address. "Is there anything that I can help with?"

"Yes. You can start by burning this," Tom handed over the diary.

Severus eyed it warily as he took from the former Slytherin. "It won't explode?"

"It's completely benign now, but I want no reminders of my incarceration in it," Tom informed Severus, who had aimed his wand at the fireplace, starting a small blaze.

Severus watched nervously as the fire ignited the diary when he threw it in, and a thick, black viscous substance began to ooze out of the diary. The substance was obviously flammable as the fire momentarily flared up, engulfing the diary. When the flames died down, all that was left of the diary was ashes. Only when he was sure that it would be safe to turn his back on the fire, did Severus turn around, and address Tom. "So where are you planning to go when you leave here?"

"That's entirely up to you," Tom could see that he'd blindsided Severus with his response, but he wanted to see how Severus reacted. "Well, it's not as if I'm rich or anything."

"Neither am I," Severus reminded him. "But I can speak to Lucius Malfoy if you so wish."

"Abraxas' son?" Tom checked he was right.

"Yes," Severus nodded. "His grandson, Draco, is a Slytherin in Potter's year."

Tom poured himself some more tea. "Ginny told me there was a Malfoy in Slytherin but she didn't say more than that, and I wasn't really that interested. How is she doing?"

Severus filled Tom in on Ginny's progress. "... but I think she will be more than a little upset when she finds out that Potter is likely dead, seeing as how she was dating him."

"He finally succumbed to her?" Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Apparently," Severus was not used to a Voldemort who seemed interested in gossip.

"You're not really sure how to take me, are you, Severus?" Tom met Severus' gaze, an amused smile playing across his lips.

"No, I'm not," Severus answered truthfully. "Your predecessor would never have been interested in Ginny's wellbeing, or what she was doing."

"Knowledge is everything, Severus, and even insignificant things may be important, something I do believe my predecessor forgot," Tom said softly, before changing the topic of conversation. "So, tell me, Severus, how will you get me out of here?"

"The Express leaves at eleven, a simple glamour, a uniform, and you can walk out of here, and once outside the gates, you can vanish," Severus wrote down an address on a slip of parchment before handing it over. "This is where I live. You can go there until I've sorted something out with Lucius."

"Tell me, what does this Lucius do as a job?" Tom asked.

"He doesn't exactly work, but he does have a finger in every pie," Severus thought his old school friend a slippery snake. "He'll be able to find somewhere for you."

Tom fell silent for a long moment, before finally deciding to fill Severus in on what he had decided a few months ago. "Actually I have an option of my own – the Riddle place."

"Your Muggle grandparents' house?" Severus revealed he knew exactly where Tom was talking about.

"Yes," Tom gave a slow cruel smile as he remembered what he'd done to them. "I think it only fitting I take it over and use it."

"But I thought you hated them," Severus had talked to the older Voldemort often enough to know this.

"I do, and that's why they're dead," Tom confirmed. "But I need somewhere to set up a base of operation from, and I don't see why I shouldn't make use of what should rightfully be mine."

"You've obviously been thinking about this," Severus noted.

"When you're locked inside a diary, there is little else to do with your time," Tom told him. "Now I need you to find out who is currently living there."

"No-one is," Severus knew the place well – the other Voldemort had made him take a trip to the graveyard when he needed a sample of his father's bones for a potion. Severus' curiosity had overcome him, and he had been unable to resist looking over the house that Voldemort should have grown up in. Expecting luxury, he had been surprised to find it overgrown, dusty, and very much not lived-in. "It's supposed to be haunted."

"Then it will be perfect," Tom decided, before yawning. "I would like to get some sleep."

"Very well," Severus showed him to his bedroom, having little other choice as to where to put the former Slytherin. "I will wake you when the Express is ready to leave."

Just as Tom lay down and closed his eyes, in the Hufflepuff dorms, Justin woke up and headed into the bathroom. When he returned, he immediately noticed that Harry's bed hadn't been slept in. After checking his wristwatch, Justin was shocked to find it was almost four in the morning. Worried, he pulled on his dressing gown and headed out of the bedroom.

Albus was rudely awoken by an alarm telling him that someone was trying to gain access to his office. Pulling on his dressing gown, he headed to his office, and opened up the gargoyles below. Not having checked his instruments, he was surprised to find a very flustered Justin come bursting through the door. "What's wrong?"

"Harry had a detention last night with Lockhart but he's still not back," Justin hurriedly told Albus. "I've checked the Defense classroom, and I can't find either of them."

"Vickers," Albus called out, and a house-elf appeared. "Please locate Professor Lockhart for me."

The house-elf didn't pop away as it usually did. "Lockie is gone, Master Head."

"Please locate Harry Potter for me," Albus asked patiently.

Again the house-elf didn't move. "Pottier is gone, Master Head."

"You may go," Albus aimed his wand at Justin, transfiguring his nightclothes into a uniform before changing his own clothing. "I need to alert the other teachers."

Justin watched as Albus headed over to his desk, and tapped a silvery instrument, a tall thin post that had numerous arms on it on the very top. "I will escort you back to Hufflepuff."

Justin followed Albus down the stairs and out onto the corridor, only for the Headmaster to stop part way up the corridor. Justin gasped when he saw what Albus had spotted. "I didn't see it."

"I only caught sight of it at the last second," Albus turned the full light of his wand onto the wall, and read out loud what was written there. "His skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever."

After departing the Express, Severus arrived home to find Tom sitting in his study reading through a potions subscription. "Good evening, my Lord."

"Don't forget, call me Tom," Tom wasn't in the mood for obsequiousness. "How did it go?"

"No-one knows where the entrance to the Chamber is, and Potter's little friend had to go home empty-handed. Bones is going to arrange for periodic searches, but we both know that she'll find nothing," Severus sat down opposite Tom. "So I think that at long last, Potter has finally joined his precious father."

"Excellent," Tom was pleased with the news. "Now, onto more pertinent matters. I want to know exactly what happened the night Voldemort was vanquished."

"Well, I'm happy for you to use Occlumency, but..." Severus began, only to be interrupted.

Tom shook his head. "I want to see the memory from outside of your mind, Severus."

"I don't have a pensieve," Severus couldn't afford such a rare luxury.

"Then we need to steal one," Tom declared. "Voldemort might have perfected his use of Occlumency but for me it would be exhausting."

Severus was surprised that Tom would open up about being so vulnerable but as Severus had sworn an oath of allegiance to him that very morning when Albus' alarm had woken both him and Tom, he was aware the young man had little to worry about from him. "Griselda Marchbanks is the keeper of the Ministry pensieves. Perhaps we could persuade her to part with one."

"I have no wish to alert anyone to my presence just yet, so it will have to wait," Tom decided, before filling Severus in on his day. "I apparated to the Riddle place before coming here, and it's a mess. I will need a large injection of cash, and if your friend, Malfoy, is as affluent as you say, then I expect him to come up with some suggestions. I'm also hoping he can solve my pensieve problem, so I would like to meet with him tomorrow."

"I don't believe Lucius owns a pensieve," Severus had never heard Lucius mention one but he was also aware that that didn't mean that the man didn't possess one. "But we can ask. In the meantime, is there anything I can get for you?"

"I would like something decent to eat," Tom indicated the half-eaten sandwich that lay on a plate on the table beside him.

"Then let me change, and we can go to a small restaurant near here," Severus offered and he left the room. After the day he had had, it was the last thing he wanted to do but he recognized an order even if it wasn't couched as one.

Charlie sat at the table, playing with his food. "I can't eat."

"You're thinking about Harry, aren't you?" Molly placed a hand over her son's.

"It's his birthday today," Charlie gave his mother a tight smile. "I still bought him a present, you know, just in case."

Molly had loved Harry as much as if he had been one of her own but even she had known that it was far too long for him to have survived. "Charlie, you have to move on."

"How can I?" Charlie shook his head. "I promised him I'd take care of him, and I failed."

"No-one could have done anything," Molly's voice was soft but firm. "It was simply Harry's time."

"But it shouldn't have been!" Charlie slammed his fist onto the table and got up. "He was too young."

Molly didn't try to stop her son as he stormed out of the house. She could see that Ginny had been listening, tears running down her daughter's face. "You miss Harry as well, don't you?"

"Mum, I did something terrible to Harry," Ginny decided to be honest with her mother now that there was no hope for Harry. "I wanted him to go out with me so I used Amortentia on him."

"Come here," Molly didn't shout at Ginny. Instead she gathered her daughter to her.

When Ginny had stopped crying, Molly set her daughter away from her. "Ginny, why did you do it?"

"Because I waited and waited for Harry to like me for myself, and then he said he liked Hannah, and I wanted him to like me instead, so I gave him some chocolates," Ginny didn't mention that she had been feeding them to Harry for weeks before he finally had succumbed.

"Where did you get the Amortentia from?" Molly asked.

"I made it as part of my scholarship training," Ginny sniffed. "But Professor Snape doesn't know that I stole it."

"If he had, I would have asked for you to be removed from the program," Molly said in a severe voice. "And if you don't promise me that you'll never do something like this again, then I'll rescind my permission for you to visit San Francisco."

Ginny was horrified. "I made a mistake, Mum, and I'm sorry." She gave another loud sniff. "And besides, Harry is dead. How could I do it again?"

"Because even though Harry is gone, you'll find someone else one day, and I don't want you to use such a dangerous potion on them," Molly cupped her daughter's cheek.

"I promise I won't," Ginny didn't believe her mother about Harry. "But there is no-one else like Harry."

"No, there isn't," Molly agreed.

"Shall I go and talk to Charlie?" Ginny offered, wanting to make up for what she'd done.

Molly shook her head, as she noticed that Charlie's arm on the family clock had moved to the Oak Tree. "He needs some time alone."

Hogwarts

Minerva walked along the corridor until she came to the wall where the words that had sealed Harry's fate had been written. They had faded weeks ago but she still kept on returning to the wall. She had first come here after telling Harry's relatives that he wouldn't ever be returning. Their joy had made her want to use a spell she knew would have gotten her arrested. Instead, she had come here to the wall; somehow it made her feel closer to her charge. "Harry, I'm sorry we let you down, and Happy Birthday." Minerva took out a handkerchief and blew her nose vigorously.

Albus walked up behind his friend and colleague, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I feel as if this is my fault, and that I should have done more to protect Harry."

"You're wise but you're not omnipotent. You couldn't have known what Lockhart would do," Minerva turned to face Albus. "I keep replaying Lockhart's behavior over and over in my mind, and I still find it hard to believe that he would do such a thing."

"Neither can I, but he did," Albus too had replayed all of his conversations that had taken place with Lockhart over and over again but he had noticed nothing that indicated that the Defense teacher had opened the Chamber. "He seemed completely clueless about the whole Chamber mystery."

"Did Amelia's team have any luck this time?" Minerva asked.

Albus shook his head. "She said that she'll continue to send them in once a week to continue the search for the Chamber."

"But what about Lockhart?" Minerva was worried that the man might return.

"I've locked him out of the wards," Albus reminded his deputy. "He can't come back even if he wants to."

Minerva shook her herself. "I'm getting old, Albus. I keep forgetting things."

"It's grief, Minnie," Albus placed his arm around Minerva's shoulder. "It plays with your mind."

"I miss him," Minerva's bottom lip trembled.

"As do I," Albus had shed tears himself over Harry's demise in private but he didn't try to hide the ones that rose to the surface at the sight of his friend's distress. "And today makes it harder."

Minerva, who was usually quite stalwart, began to weep softly and turned into the comfort Albus offered her.

The Ministry

Amelia studied the girl standing in front of her. "Auror Tonks, this is your second offence for fighting. What do you have to say?"

Tonks met her superior's eyes, and then she answered honestly. "Auror Beddoes was rude to me, Ma'am, and I just lost it."

"Again?" Amelia said in an acerbic voice.

"Yes, Ma'am," Tonks wasn't about to deny what she had done.

"Normally I would suspend you but instead I'm assigning you to Hogwarts," Amelia had thought long and hard about Tonks and why she was here. "You will continue the search for the Chamber."

Tonks was surprised. "Ma'am?"

"I understand that you loved Harry," Amelia said gently. "We all did, and rather than suspend you, I would rather put you to work to help in finding his... him."

Tonks swallowed hard as she tried to stop the tears that rose up at the thought of Harry's body lying alone in the Chamber somewhere. "I'll do my best, Ma'am."

"I know you will, Tonks," Amelia signed off on her order, and handed the sheet to Tonks. "Dismissed."

"Ma'am," Tonks saluted her superior and left the room, her face falling the moment she closed the door. Being in Hogwarts would only bring Harry's death closer to the surface but there was little she could do about it, so she headed off in the direction of the apparition point.

Fletchley Manor

Edmund Finch-Fletchley had had enough of his son's miserable face. "Whatever it is, boy, spit it out."

"It would have been Harry's birthday today," Justin said in a flat voice. "Not that anyone has probably remembered."

Edmund shook his head. "What does it matter? The boy's dead, and moping over his bloody birthday isn't going to bring him back."

"It matters to me," Justin uncharacteristically snapped at his father.

Edmund scowled at his son. "Anyone would think you loved the boy."

"I did," Justin met his father's glance. "Harry was my best friend."

"Anyone would have thought he was more than that the way you've been weeping and wailing over him," Edmund snarled.

Justin gritted his teeth in anger, fed-up with his father constantly harping on about his sexuality. "I have a girlfriend."

"The frozen girl," Edmund's voice was full of sarcasm. "I don't see you weeping tears over her."

"Luna is going to be alright," Justin's voice was thick with the tears his father accused him of. "Harry isn't."

"I can't take this," Edmund stalked off, throwing a comment over his shoulder. "Cordelia, deal with the boy, he's your bloody son."

Cordelia Finch-Fletchley got up from the breakfast table and put her arm around Justin. "Come with me."

Justin let his mother lead him to the very center of the maze that stood beside the rose garden his mother had cultivated during her marriage. They then sat down. "Why can't Father understand? Why does he always have to constantly be pushing me towards girls?"

"He wants an heir one day, Justin, and you are expected to marry and provide him with one," Cordelia said softly.

"I can hardly forget it," Justin said bitterly.

"Justin, did you like Harry as more than a friend?" Cordelia asked seriously, wondering if this was why Justin was so angry at his father's stance. "I'll understand if you did."

"Mum, Harry was my best friend, that's all," Justin protested.

"Then why did you never bring him home?" Cordelia had always wondered but had never asked before.

"Do you remember how Father acted when I brought Ramon home?" Justin asked his mother.

Cordelia winced. "Yes."

"He'd have been like that with Harry," Justin said softly.

"But Harry wasn't titled or rich," Cordelia knew exactly what had appealed to her husband about Ramon. "And he wouldn't have had any connections. You said that Harry lived with his relatives in a semi-detached house in Little Whinging."

"He did," Justin confirmed. "But in the wizarding world Harry was a celebrity. He was the Boy Who Lived."

Cordelia was shocked. "Harry was that boy who saved everyone?"

"Yes," Justin nodded. "And not only that, he was titled and rich. He owned several houses, Mum. He'd have been Lord Potter when he was old enough, and he'd also have been able to take a seat on the Wizengamot, the wizarding equivalent of our justice system." After Ginny had told them about the Wizengamot, Harry and Justin had done some research into Harry's family.

Cordelia now understood why Justin had kept quiet about Harry. "Your father would have liked him if he'd known all that."

"But it wouldn't have been genuine, Mum," Justin had felt nauseated watching his father suck up to Ramon, the son of a Spanish landowner, and destined to inherit a great of money and a title. "And I liked Harry too much to do that to him."

"You said to your father that you loved Harry," Cordelia reminded Justin of his declaration, before she again tried to find out whether Justin had been in love with Harry. "Justin, if you loved Harry as more than a friend, you really can tell me. I won't tell your father."

Justin scowled at his mother. "Mum, I did love Harry but not like that. Harry was more like a brother to me."

"Something you've always wanted," Cordelia dropped her head, not wanting Justin to see that she was upset. "I'm sorry that I haven't been able to give you a sibling."

"Mum, it's okay," Justin grasped his mother's hand, his anger dissipating at his mother's distress. "I've been happy on my own."

"But Harry did fill that gap in your life, didn't he?" Cordelia lifted her head to reveal that she had tears in her eyes. "So you must have needed someone else."

"I suppose," Justin admitted, not wanting to make his mother more upset.

Cordelia cupped Justin's face. "Justin, it's alright to tell me that you wanted brothers and sisters."

"I did, Mum," Justin smiled a little ruefully at his mother. "At least until I got to know Harry, I did. Then I didn't need that anymore."

"Did he love you as well?" Cordelia asked.

"I'd like to think so but I'll never know now," Justin's face crumpled. "Because he's gone."

Cordelia gathered her sobbing son into her arms. "It's going to be alright."

Justin didn't say that he thought differently but took comfort in his mother's arm. When his weeping ended, he lifted up his head. "Mum, why could no-one find the Chamber? Find out what had happened to Harry?"

Cordelia had spoken with Justin's head of house about what had happened. "We sometimes never know why things happen when they do. But I do know that you won't be able to get over this until you are able to put it behind you."

"I can't, Mum, not until I found out what happened to Harry," Justin said in a determined voice.

"Justin, others more qualified than you have tried and failed," Cordelia reminded Justin.

"I don't care. I'm going to find Harry once the girls are revived, and we go back to school," Justin was adamant.

"Justin, I'm not even sure that the school will be re-opened," Cordelia had been told as such by Justin's head of house. "You're probably going to have to go to Eton as we originally planned. The

Headmaster has agreed as a favor to your father to let you attend this September."

"But I don't want to go to Eton," Justin protested. "I want to go back to Hogwarts."

"You'll have to go if Hogwarts doesn't re-open," Cordelia stroked Justin's hair back.

"I'd rather go to the local comprehensive," Justin snapped a little belligerently.

Cordelia slowly shook her head. "Justin, you know that won't happen. Your father has spoken, and I'm sorry but I can't go against him."

"No-one ever does, do they?" Justin responded bitterly, before tugging free of his mother to rise to his feet. "I'm going for a walk." Justin then stalked off, leaving his upset mother behind.

End of Chapter: Cornelius Fudge visits Azkaban; Justin, Luna, and Hermione search for the Chamber.

Chapter 32: The Prisoner of Azkaban

August 23rd 1994

Ginny picked up the newspaper that had been delivered to her room, and read with interest about the Quidditch World Cup. Ireland had beaten Bulgaria but Viktor Krum, Bulgaria's famed seeker, had taken the snitch for the losing team, and Ginny really wished she could have seen it. An alarm began to warn her that breakfast was due to start shortly, and she put down the paper, and headed out of her room.

When she reached the dining room, Ginny joined the other trainees who had been assigned to her table. She had quickly discovered that she was the youngest, and she felt almost stupid in comparison to them. She listened in consternation as one of the trainees began to denigrate Snape. "I don't see why he's lecturing on plants," the girl, Clarissa, wrinkled her nose. "I mean he's only a potions teacher."

"He's actually a Potions Master," Ginny defended her teacher.

"Who has done nothing in the world of research for years," Clarissa responded in a snotty voice.

"It doesn't mean that he's not capable of lecturing," Ginny continued to offer up a defense.

"We'll see," Clarissa got to her feet. "Emily, let's go. This conversation is boring me."

Ginny was soon left alone as the other two trainees also left. Dismayed, Ginny picked at her breakfast until it was time for Severus' lecture to start. Sitting in the very back row, Ginny listened intently, making notes as Severus gave an outstanding address to both the trainees and his peers. She was surprised to find that he had a very broad knowledge of plants and their uses, and he demonstrated this in the question and answer session. And Ginny couldn't help but snigger when he put down the girl who had so openly denigrated Severus that morning for trying to show him up.

When the lecture ended, Ginny was joined by Severus. "That was brilliant, Professor. I didn't realize you knew so much about plants."

"A good Potions Master has to be au fait with all of the plants and other ingredients he uses, Miss Weasley," Like Ginny, Severus kept his tone formal in the atmosphere of the conference. "And I have a wizarding degree in herbology as well as in potions."

"The girl who tried to tell you that you were wrong about Arisaema was really rude about you this morning," Ginny said in a quiet voice. "She said that you had done no current research, and that you shouldn't be lecturing."

"She was correct," Severus admitted, more than a little amused at Ginny's shocked face. "I have not undertaken any recent research but that does not mean that I am not capable of lecturing, as I have just proven."

"Why haven't you done any research?" Ginny asked as they walked towards the lunchroom.

"Teaching your fellow dunderheads takes up most of my time," Severus said, more than a little bitterness entering his voice.

Ginny dropped her head and asked in a quiet voice. "Do you think I'm a dunderhead?"

Severus realized he'd hurt the girl's feelings, and he really wasn't in the mood to pander to an upset child, so he told the truth. "Not at all, but you still have a long way to go."

"I'll do my best not to let you down," Ginny promised. "And it was worth missing the Quidditch Final to come here."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Severus stopped at the door. "You may go in and join the others on your table. I doubt they will be so negative about me now."

He was right, and the lunch was probably the best meal Ginny had had since arriving, the talk not centering on potions, and turning instead to the Quidditch World Cup. "I should have attended but it clashed with the conference."

"I wish I could have gone," a tall swarthy boy named Dick said. "I read about it as well."

"You go to Hogwarts don't you?" the girl named Emily asked out of the blue.

"Yes, why?" Ginny asked, a little confused seeing as they all knew Severus was her teacher as well as her mentor.

"When I was reading about the Cup I saw something about the Triwizard Tournament being held there," Emily responded.

"You can't be serious?" Clarissa finally joined in with the conversation. "The Tournament hasn't been held for ages."

"In almost two hundred years," Dick informed her, having also read the piece. "Apparently it's rumored Miss Weasley's Headmaster is trying to promote a better unity between her school, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, and he's therefore suggested holding the Tournament."

"I shouldn't believe everything you read," Wyatt, an American wizard who made up their table, joined in. "That piece was written by Rita Skeeter, and even over here we all know about her."

Ginny agreed with him. "Wyatt is right. I wouldn't believe it. Even though I'm still going to be allowed to continue this course, Hogwarts might be closed down."

"Because of those students being petrified?" Wyatt asked, making it obvious that this was probably one of the reasons why he had heard of Skeeter.

"Yes," Ginny nodded. "It all depends on what happens when they wake up."

"Do you know them?" Emily asked.

"All of them," Ginny told her.

"And do you know Harry Potter?" Clarissa slipped in, as she was aware that the infamous Boy Who Lived attended Hogwarts.

"He's my boyfriend," Ginny was under strict instructions not to tell anyone that Harry had disappeared, as it wouldn't be announced until it was absolutely necessary to do so.

"Don't lie," Clarissa snapped.

A surprising ally came up behind Ginny in the shape of Severus. "She's not, Miss Gladstone. And you might want to think in future before you open your mouth. I would hate for your scholarship to be taken away from you for misconduct."

Clarissa's mouth snapped shut, and she dropped her head. Ginny flashed Severus a grateful smile, before the talk then turned away from the subject of Hogwarts and Harry, to discuss the next lecture. Even though she knew it wasn't likely to happen, Ginny decided that she'd read the piece on the Tournament later if she had time. But the newspaper was gone when she returned to her room, as was her chance to read about the Tournament.

It was a chance, however, that a prisoner in Azkaban didn't miss.

Cornelius Fudge made his way up the corridors of Azkaban, his Senior Undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge, flanking him. "I really don't see a need for more than one visit a year here."

Dolores whipped out a notepad, and made a note. "I'll have a motion entered to that effect, Minister."

Cornelius stopped at a barred door, the gloom beyond it making him shiver. "It's a pity we can't just feed them all to the Dementors, but that wouldn't make very good press, would it?"

"I'm sure we could find some alternative that might be acceptable," Dolores again made a note in her pink notepad. She then turned to the guard, who was standing, as he had been told to, twenty paces behind them. "You, don't just stand there, open the door."

The first prisoner on the route was Bellatrix Lestrange, a former Death Eater, who had been proud to announce her allegiance to the Dark Lord, and still continued to do so, even now. In her cell, Bellatrix became aware of voices, and they weren't in her head, or at least she didn't think they were, and they were talking about her.

Scuttling across to the open grating, she came face to face with the visitors. "Come to play with the inmates, Minister?"

Cornelius took a step backwards, Bellatrix' breath and body odors were repulsive. "Doesn't she bathe?"

"Inmates are allowed a shower once a week, and she's refused every time," the warden informed the Minister.

Dolores interjected, "Well perhaps we'd better see about forcing her to take one, for the sake of everyone around her."

Bellatrix thought Dolores looked like a reptile, and she didn't hesitate to point it out. "Who's the froggie?"

Dolores' wide-jowled face tightened. "Better make that a hose-down. This one is rather dangerous, and we wouldn't want her escaping now, would we?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the warden didn't care either way; it wouldn't be him who'd have to administer it.

Bellatrix was about to say something else derogatory when she spotted the Daily Prophet sticking out of Fudge's briefcase. Before anyone could stop her, her hand snaked out, and she grabbed it, receding into the depths of her cell, and calling out in a sing-song voice, "Bella has something to read. Bella has something to read."

The warden pulled out his wand. "Would you like me to retrieve it, Minister?"

The thought of touching the newspaper after Bellatrix had handled it, absolutely revolted Fudge to his core. "She can keep it – it's only a newspaper. Let's move on."

Three cells later, they arrived at the cell of the man who was supposed to be the Dark Lord's number one associate, Sirius Black. The man in question walked casually up to the bars, showing no sign of the madness that afflicted his cousin. "Minister Fudge, what brings you to this holiday spot?"

Cornelius still didn't understand why Sirius hadn't gone insane like the other inmates. "It's my bi-monthly monthly inspection."

Sirius glanced at Fudge's bag. "No paper this time?"

Cornelius occasionally allowed Sirius to take the paper from him. "Your cousin appropriated it first."

"Pity," Sirius sat down his bed. "I could have used a little light reading."

Cornelius shook his head, and moved on. Only once they'd visited each and every inmate, was the loathsome job over for another two months. Cornelius didn't understand why his predecessor had instigated such a task in the first place; anyone in their right mind would find it tedious, and rather gruesome. "I think it's time we left, Dolores."

"I couldn't agree more, Minister," Dolores followed him out. Because of their visit, some of the more unstable inmates were now making a racket that was starting to become earsplitting. "How do you deal with that noise?"

"Like this," the warden slid back a door, and Dolores clutched her fluffy pink jumper right over her heart. "Dementors."

"Don't worry, Madam Undersecretary, they're completely harmless if they're fed regularly," the warden stood back as several of the Dementors glided out and in towards the high security area they'd just left. Within moment the screams and shouts had died down to tortured murmurs and soft pleas to leave them alone. "We'd better be off."

In his cell, Sirius Black felt the cold despair that warned him that the Dementors were doing their rounds again. Assured that no-one would see, his body began to change, and he became a large black dog, which lay down on the bed and whimpered. Although he was spared most of the effects from the Dementors' presence in this form, he still wasn't entirely immune.

In her cell, Bellatrix screamed out her anger at the Dementors' invasion. Then she crunched up into a small ball at the back of her cell, and began to rock herself, whispering things no-one would have been able understand even if they had been listening.

She was, however, brought unceremoniously back to reality a few hours later when cold water filled her cell, making her gasp and scream obscenities at the men who had aimed their wands at her. "When I'm free, you're going to lie my feet, and I'm going to dance on your entrails."

"Of course, you are," the elderly guard had heard it so many times that he'd become immune, and he continued to blast Bella with cold water.

A day later she fell sick, and two days after that, she disappeared from Azkaban.

August 30th 1994

Feeling strange and disorientated, Hermione opened her eyes to find her mother standing over her. "Mummy, what are you doing here?"

"I think you should take a look around," Virginia stood away from her daughter.

Hermione quickly realized she was in a hospital room. "What am I doing in hospital?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Lester joined his wife.

"I was walking up the corridor with Luna," to Hermione it seemed as though it was only moments ago. "We heard a hissing noise, and I thought that Nagini must have gotten out and come looking for Harry again." Hermione smiled. "The last time she escaped she was found outside the Transfiguration classroom; somehow she'd gotten up onto the window ledge."

"I'm not interested in this Nagini, just what happened," Lester snapped, wanting to get to the bottom of his daughter's incident.

Virginia turned on her husband. "And she's trying to tell us if you'd let her."

Hermione wasn't used to hearing her parents talk like that. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine, darling," Virginia kissed Hermione's cheek. "Carry on."

Hermione wasn't so sure her mother was being entirely honest but she continued nevertheless. "I looked towards the window, and that's the last thing I remember. What happened?"

"You were found with Luna," Virginia explained. "You'd both been petrified."

"Is she alright?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"She's being administered the Mandrake potion as we speak," Lester leant over and placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "As are all the other children."

"Others?" Hermione asked in a shocked voice.

"Three other children were also found petrified," Virginia could see how much of a surprise this was to her daughter.

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"Susan Bones was petrified in February, just after Valentines' Day. She realized that she had accidentally included her transfiguration homework in her defense homework, and she was heading for the defense teacher's classroom when she never came back," Virginia told her daughter about the first incident after her own. "Then a girl named Hannah Abbott was petrified just after Easter but no-one knows what she was doing up on the second floor, and finally a boy from your House, Colin Creevey, was found clutching his camera on the second floor after it was supposed to have been sealed off."

"Thank goodness no-one died," Hermione said with relief, before something hit her. "But that means that the Chamber has to be on the second floor."

"That's why the floor had been sealed off," Virginia confirmed Hermione's suspicions. "But I'm afraid I have bad news for you, someone did die."

"George?" Hermione asked after her boyfriend first.

"No, he's actually outside waiting to see you," Lester grimaced.

"Daddy!" Hermione berated her father.

"Sorry," Lester didn't mean it though. He didn't like his precious daughter dating anyone.

Hermione looked from one parent to the other. "So who died then? Was it someone I know?"

"Hermione, darling, I'm afraid it was your friend Harry," Virginia's stomach flopped over as her daughter's face crumpled. "I'm so sorry."

Hermione began to weep, and she let her mother gather her up.

Similar scenes were taking place in almost all of the remaining rooms where the other children were being resuscitated. In her room, Susan was recounting how she'd gone to get her missing homework, and upon hearing a strange noise, she had been turning around when she caught the reflection of something in the window, and that was the last thing she remembered. "I don't know what happened after that."

"Susan, you were attacked by the creature from the Chamber," Amelia informed her niece. "As were Hannah Abbott, and Colin Creevey from Gryffindor."

"Are they okay?" Susan asked anxiously.

Lucy took Susan's left hand. "Yes, but I'm afraid that we do have bad news for you."

Amelia felt Susan's grip on her hand tighten, and she told her niece the bad news. "I'm afraid Harry was killed."

Susan burst into tears, words tumbling out of mouth. "I was so horrible to him, Lucy, and I made a mistake. He said he might be my friend again but now I'll never know."

Lucy was surprised that Susan was confessing to her, and not to Amelia. "I'm sure Harry was your friend."

"He was," Amelia assured her niece. "He and Hannah kept visiting you in Hogwarts until I had you moved here."

This just upset Susan more, and she began to get hysterical, forcing the nurse with her to administer a calming potion.

Amelia turned at the sound of rapping at the door, and the sound of it then opening. "Albus, this isn't a good time."

"It's important, Amelia," Albus' voice was grave.

"I'll stay with her," Lucy slipped onto the bed beside Susan and held the now silent and white-faced girl against her.

Amelia got up and left the room, closing the door behind her. "This had better be good."

"We believe we know where on the second floor the entrance to the Chamber is," Albus said immediately.

Amelia was absolutely stunned. "How?"

"From Colin Creevey and Hannah Abbott. Colin said he heard Lockhart speaking Latin – I think he was bringing down the wards – before Lockhart entered the second floor. Colin followed him onto the second floor, intending to take a photo of what he was doing. Colin said he was petrified after spotting Lockhart going into the girls' bathroom on the second floor, so he waited outside with his camera, and when he heard a noise, he snapped a photo. That's the last thing he remembers," Albus recited what Colin had told him and Colin's parents.

"And what about Miss Abbott?" Amelia encouraged Albus to go on when he took a moment to catch his breath.

"Hannah was caught short and needed a bathroom, so she nipped along to the one on the second floor. She had almost reached it when she saw Lockhart going into the toilets, and when he didn't come out after a while, she followed him in. She said that she slipped on a pool of water as she entered, and that was the last thing she remembers," Albus had been amazed at how lucky the two children had been. "With what the two children have told me, I believe the entrance to the Chamber is somewhere in the girls'

bathroom. It makes sense now that I think about it; no-one usually uses that bathroom, Myrtle died there, and Hannah and Colin were both found in and just outside of it."

"I'll send more men to try and locate the Chamber," Amelia promised. "If we can open it and destroy whatever is in there, then you can re-open the school."

"If you can't locate and open it, then I will permanently seal the entrance off, so that I can re-open the school," Albus had immediately decided what he would do after listening to the two children. "I'm going to give your men a few days by reopening the school a few days later than usual, but if they cannot get into the Chamber, then the girls' bathroom will be sealed off forever."

Visiting Luna, Justin listened to what the Headmaster had to say, Luna at his side. "I want to help in the search."

"So do I," Luna chimed in.

"I'm afraid that I can't let you do that," Albus said regretfully. "Madam Bones' team has already searched the bathroom, and they have found nothing."

"Then it won't hurt if we look as well, will it?" Hermione asked in a determined voice, having persuaded her parents to let her out of their sight to visit her best friend.

"I'm sorry," Albus shook his head.

Hermione got to her feet, tears coming to her eyes. "Sir, please. Harry was our friend, and I would never be able to live with myself if I didn't at least try to find him. Please!"

Albus slowly nodded. "Very well, but only under the supervision of myself. And only if your parents agree to let you return to Hogwarts a few days earlier than the other students. I also want your word that you won't go into the bathroom without me if they say yes."

Luna, Hermione, and Justin all gave their word, and then they set out to convince their parents to let them return to look for Harry. Luna's father had no problem with his daughter returning. As far as he was concerned, Harry had made the world a safer place, and his

body deserved a decent burial. Justin's parents had been a little harder to convince, more so his mother but she had eventually given in, and Justin had been allowed to return. Hermione, however, had had the hardest time, but even her parents had eventually agreed when their daughter had cried piteously. When George found out what was happening, he too begged his parents to let him return early, and so the four children returned to Hogwarts on the day the school should have reopened.

Two days later

Hermione lay in bed thinking about what had happened since she had been de-petrified. The Headmaster had been as good as his word, and had allowed her and the other three children to search the bathroom for two days, but like the Aurors, they too had found nothing. Giving a huge sigh, Hermione threw back the covers. "I can't just lie here like this."

Getting up, Hermione swiftly dressed, and picked up her wand. After leaving the common room, she was just making her way onto the second floor landing when she spotted a flash of blonde hair. "Luna!"

Luna span around at the hissed sound of her name. "Hermione, what are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," Hermione caught up with her friend. "Where are you going?"

"To find Harry," Luna said in a determined voice.

"Then you're going the same place I am," Hermione took hold of her friend's hand. "Come on."

Almost silently they crept along the corridor until just before they reached the bathroom. Hermione, however, stopped dead when she spotted someone coming the other way. "Headmaster!"

Albus wasn't surprised to see the two girls. "Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood. Good morning."

"You're sealing the bathroom off, aren't you?" Hermione asked, fear lacing her voice.

"I've just done it," Albus said with regret in his voice.

Luna gripped Hermione's hand more tightly. "But you can't do that. Harry's still alive, I'm sure of it."

"We've already talked about this, Miss Lovegood," Albus took both girls' arms. "Hold on."

Hermione gasped as they appeared in a sitting room where a fire was burning brightly. "But you can't apparate in Hogwarts."

"I can," Albus indicated that the girls should sit down in the two comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace, and he summoned a chair for himself. "Help yourself to tea, and I will be back momentarily."

Luna and Hermione both sat down but neither touched the teapot. When Albus returned, they both looked over, Hermione noticing the silver instrument in his hand. "What is that?"

"It was an instrument I used to keep an eye on Harry, and you will both notice the black tip on it," Albus handed it to Luna.

Luna took it and ran her finger over it. "Are you saying that because this is black, it means that Harry is dead?"

"I'm afraid so," Albus took the instrument back when Luna held it out.

Luna shook her head. "I just know that he can't be dead."

"What makes you say that?" Albus asked as he sat down and poured tea from the teapot the girls had ignored.

"Do you remember Mummy's column?" Luna took the teacup for something to occupy her hands.

"I do," Albus confirmed. "Do you possess the same intuition she did?"

"I think so," Luna glanced over at Hermione, before continuing. "And I believe that Harry and Hermione are meant to be together."

"But isn't Miss Granger supposed to be dating Mr. Weasley?" Albus asked.

"Yes, but she should be dating Harry!" Luna exclaimed. Glancing at her friend she could see that Hermione was frowning. "Sorry, Hermione, but you know that I think that you and Harry should be together."

"That's impossible, Luna," Albus used Luna's first name to soften his words. "Harry is dead, and nothing we do will bring him back."

"What about if he's petrified?" Luna asked defiantly. "And we've sealed him in?"

"If he is petrified, then that means the creature in the Chamber is still alive, and a clear and present danger to all the pupils returning to this school," Albus responded, and then he held up the instrument. "But I don't see how that can be, for this instrument is never wrong."

"Well I think it's wrong this time," Luna said stubbornly.

"I'm sorry but...", Albus began, only for Hermione to interrupt him.

"How do you know the instrument isn't indicating that Harry is dead because it can't sense him?" Hermione suggested as the idea popped into her head. "If we don't know where the Chamber is, perhaps your instrument doesn't either. Maybe the Chamber is shielded from external magic."

Albus had to admit that Hermione had made a good point. "That may be true, but if by some long shot Harry is petrified, then he's safe."

Luna brought up another possibility. "But what about if he's injured and hiding from the Basilisk?"

"You think it's a Basilisk?" Albus asked in surprise. "I don't see how that can be."

"Why not?" Hermione had also come to the same conclusion. "It's a creature that petrifies if you don't directly meet its gaze."

"Myrtle Seaton's heart was ripped from her body," Albus reminded the two girls of what he had told them after Cedric's death. "A Basilisk does not do that."

"Someone could have done that to her after the Basilisk killed her," Hermione pointed out.

"And if that's true, it could also explain Cedric Diggory's death," Luna added.

Albus could see that both girls were serious about what they believed in. "You both bring up good points which I will, of course, consider. A Basilisk would certainly explain Mr. Diggory's sudden demise, but in order to determine the possibility, I will need to revisit the scene of Myrtle's death."

"Then you'll unseal the bathroom?" Luna asked excitedly.

"No," Albus shook his head. "If Harry is petrified, then he's safe."

"And what about if he's injured?" Hermione asked softly.

"I doubt that would be the case," Albus rose to his feet. "A Basilisk would have smelt Harry out by now, and killed him."

"You think that's what happened, don't you?" Luna questioned Albus' belief.

"If you're right about the Basilisk, and given the state of my instrument, then unfortunately yes, I do," Albus walked over to a cupboard and withdrew an ornately carved basin.

Hermione also got up, her natural curiosity coming to the forefront. "Is that a pensieve, Sir?"

"It is, Miss Granger," Albus wasn't surprised that Hermione had recognized it. "Five points to Gryffindor."

At that moment Hermione was more interested in Harry than in points. "Are you going to use it to look at a memory?"

"I am," Albus could see both girls were brimming with curiosity. "Would you two like to join me?"

"Will it hurt?" Luna hadn't covered pensieves in Defense yet, and was unsure of exactly what they did, or how they worked.

"Not at all," Albus held out his hand. "We should hold hands. I have a lot of memories in there and I do not wish to lose you in one."

After joining hands, the three of them immersed themselves in the pensieve, a grey mist floating around them. "Why aren't we looking at a memory?"

"This is the inert stage," Albus told Hermione. "The pensieve will only start to show the memory once I have selected it."

"So how could we have gotten lost in here?" Luna was staring at the grey mist, her hand waving through the air as she played with the tendrils of vapor.

"If you had touched the pensieve without me, you would have been drawn into a random memory," Albus explained. "It's a failsafe to stop someone from trying to search out a specific memory that belongs to me. Only I can select a particular memory unless I key you into the pensieve."

As Albus finished speaking, Hermione and Luna found themselves in a familiar corridor, and there was a familiar figure standing frozen in front of them. Luna looked around in astonishment at the clarity of the memory. "This is Hogwarts."

"It's the second floor," Hermione also spoke out loud. "And that's you, Sir."

"It is," Albus began the memory. "I should warn you that what you are about to see isn't pleasant."

"We have to see this," Luna grasped Hermione's hand tighter. "If it helps us find Harry, then it's important."

"Very well," Albus led the way into the girls' bathroom, trailing after the image of his younger self.

Luna gasped at the sight of the prone girl, a hole in her chest revealing that her heart had indeed been torn out. Hermione, who

had seen some pretty gruesome things in her parents' dental surgery on occasion, was less affected by the sight. She noted that the girl's eyes were wide open. "Were Cedric's eyes open like that?"

"Yes," Albus confirmed. "But that doesn't mean anything."

"You said you spoke to Myrtle," Hermione turned away from the sight on the floor. "Did she have any idea what happened to her?"

"She said she heard someone speaking outside of her toilet, and she opened the door," Albus recanted what the ghost had said. "Then she said she floated off."

"That's it?" Luna had thought that Myrtle would have remembered more.

"Yes," Albus glanced back as his former self covered over Myrtle's body. "I've seen everything I need to, and I don't believe that it is a Basilisk in the Chamber."

"I do," Hermione refused to give up on her suspicion. "And I believe that Myrtle's heart was taken after it killed her."

"Why would anyone do that?" Luna asked her friend.

"Some potions require a human heart," Hermione told Luna. "And anyone evil enough to kill someone with a Basilisk, would be evil enough to do that."

"Have you been in the Restricted Section, Miss Granger?" Albus asked in a stern voice when Hermione stopped speaking.

Hermione blushed guiltily, and admitted she had. "I just wanted a look while no-one was here."

"Five points from Gryffindor," Albus revoked his earlier award.

Just like earlier, Hermione wasn't bothered about the points. Instead she focused on what she believed. "I'm right about the potions, aren't I, Sir?"

"You are," Albus rubbed his beard. "And despite my hasty dismissal of the Basilisk theory, you may be onto something; something we have never considered before."

Hermione was rather pleased by Albus' comment. "So does this mean that we can continue to look for Harry?"

"I'm sorry, but no," Albus still refused. "If you are correct about the Basilisk, then the school might end up in terrible danger once more if I unsealed the bathroom."

"Couldn't Lockhart come back and do that?" Hermione knew that the former teacher had overridden the wards set up by the Gringotts employees.

"I've used Hogwarts' wards to seal the bathroom this time," Albus informed her. "Something I should have done last year."

"So who can undo the spell?" Luna asked in a worried voice, afraid that if something happened to Albus then no-one would be able to find Harry.

"Both Minerva and myself can," Albus informed her as he withdrew the three of them from the pensieve.

"So when can we look for Harry again?" Hermione asked, determined not to give up on her friend now that she knew the spell to seal up the bathroom could be reversed.

Albus was aware that Harry's friends would keep pestering him until he relented, and so he decided that he would allow them to search for Harry again. "Not when the school is occupied."

"Christmas?" Luna asked hopefully.

"If the school is empty," Albus agreed.

"Can't you close it like you do at Easter?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, but I will only do that if all students have somewhere to go over the holidays," Albus said. "Particularly given we have an escaped prisoner on the loose."

Hermione understood Albus' stance, but she continued to question him. "If you can't close the school at Christmas, then can we stay here over Easter to try to find Harry when you do close the school for the holiday?"

"Yes, but again, only if your parents agree to it," Albus said after a few moments' deliberation. He had himself wanted to continue trying that day but he had had to force himself to consider the needs of the many against the needs of the one.

"Thank you," both girls chorused.

"Now, I'm expecting a visitor, and I think you should both head back to your houses," Albus steered the girls towards the door to his office.

"Can I go to Gryffindor with Hermione?" Luna asked hopefully as she didn't want to be alone.

"As long as you leave before the Express arrives," Albus was willing to bend the rules given the circumstances. "And you can tell Mr. Finch-Fletchley the same."

Thanking the Headmaster again, the girls headed towards the outer office.

Next chapter: A new defense teacher; Susan believes Ginny is guilty of a crime.

Chapter 33: Remus Lupin

The group walked into the office to find a tall, shabby-looking man coming through the door. "Headmaster, forgive the intrusion. I knocked but no-one answered."

"Remus, it's good to see you," Albus walked over and shook hands with him. He then turned to Hermione and Luna. "Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, this is your new Defense teacher, Professor Lupin."

"Hello," Remus shook hands with both girls. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He then turned to the Headmaster. "I don't mean to be rude, but can we talk privately?"

"The girls are just leaving," Albus smiled at the two girls, who both said goodbye and left. "Remus, how are you doing?"

"As well as can be expected," Remus sat down tiredly in a chair. "Have you sealed the bathroom yet?"

"I just came from there," Albus called for a house-elf and ordered tea. "But I have to tell you that the girls came up with an interesting hypothesis about it."

"The ones who just left?" Remus glanced behind him at the now closed door.

"Yes," Albus could see he'd surprised his newest staffer. "Both girls suspect that a Basilisk is responsible for their petrification, and that is what is down in the Chamber with Harry."

Remus mulled the idea over. "If it is, then Harry is probably dead."

"Which is what my instruments are telling me," Albus showed Remus the same instrument he had taken into the girls. "But Miss Lovegood believes that Harry might still be alive."

"Doubtful," Remus said after examining the black tip on the instrument. "And on reflection, I don't see how it can be a Basilisk because of..."

"Myrtle Seaton," Albus interrupted. "We've already considered her."

"Thank you," Remus thanked the house-elf that appeared with tea for him, before continuing his conversation with Albus. "And what did you come up with?"

"Miss Granger has been using some of her spare time to sneak into the Restricted Section," Albus smiled. "She's one of the most intelligent students to ever come into this school, and her thirst for knowledge is unquenchable. She suggested that maybe Myrtle was killed by the Basilisk and her heart removed to make a potion."

"That would be Dark Magic," Remus murmured as he sipped his piping hot tea.

"And as we both know, one of the students attending Hogwarts at the time wouldn't have hesitated to use it," Albus' smile vanished. "I'm going to have to speak to Amelia Bones about this. We may have to open up an investigation into Cedric Diggory's death after all if the girls are correct about the Basilisk."

"It would certainly explain the strange circumstances surrounding his sudden demise," Remus mused, before making an observation. "You feel guilty."

"Of course," Albus nodded slowly. "I am the Headmaster, and as such I am supposed to be responsible for the students under my care; a job that I failed miserably at last year. I lost Cedric, I almost lost five other students, and most importantly, I lost Harry."

Remus' own face echoed Albus' sadness. "I always hoped that I would get the chance to meet him again, but that won't happen now." He made an effort to smile. "At least he's with his family, although none of them should be where they are."

"You couldn't have known what Sirius would do," Albus didn't have to be a werewolf to sense Remus' guilt.

"But I should have felt something from him," Remus barked out, his anger at himself for failing to do so never far from the surface. "But I didn't, and with Harry's death, everyone's gone." Remus shook his head in dismay. "Black has a lot to answer for. And I still don't understand why he did it."

"Perhaps he was afraid," Albus suggested.

"We were all afraid back then but we didn't sell out to You-Know-Who," Remus reminded Albus, before shaking himself. "I'm sorry. You don't need to hear this."

"It's alright," Albus assured him. "But you need to try to not let the past bring you down."

"It's hard not to given what's just happened to Harry," Remus gave a wry smile, and changed the subject. "Has any progress been made at tracking down Lestrangle?"

"No." As head of the Wizengamot, Albus received a daily report from Amelia. "And there have been no sightings of her since she escaped. Amelia believes she may have drowned."

"We can only hope," Remus would have happily drowned her himself if he could have.

"Amelia doesn't believe in hoping, and she is concerned that after reading the false newspaper report on the Tournament, that Lestrangle may be coming here," Albus let Remus in on what was happening.

"But that's why I'm here. If she comes anywhere near this place, I'll be able to track her scent," Remus could see that his response wasn't the one that Albus wanted to hear.

"You're here because I believe you will be an asset in the protection of the pupils of this school, and not to track her down," Albus said firmly. "I can't lock Lestrangle out of the wards as I have nothing of hers to do it with, so unlike Lockhart, she's a threat. But she's not a threat I want you to tackle."

"I still don't believe she'll come here, and if she does, then I will alert you," Remus picked up his cloak. "But if by chance she crosses my path on the wrong night, then she'll be sorry."

"Just be careful," Albus warned. "I don't want you in Azkaban in her place."

"I'm not that stupid. I just meant if she should be stupid enough to enter the Shrieking Shack," Remus clarified what he had meant.

"I really don't want to lose anyone else, Remus," Albus stood up. "So please don't go looking for trouble."

"I won't," Remus also stood up and held out his hand. "It's nice to be back, even if the circumstances aren't what I hoped for."

"It's nice to have you back," Albus said, just as an instrument on his desk began to chime. "Severus is on his way up."

"This should be awkward," Remus turned to the door, having to hide a smile at the shock that coursed over the potion master's face. "Good morning, Severus."

Severus ignored Remus. "What is he doing here?"

"He's the new Defense teacher," Albus winced at the furious look on Severus' face. He knew that Severus would have some choice words about his decision later that day.

"Just keep him out of my way," Severus walked over to Albus. "I'm here to pick up the class schedule."

"I've rearranged things so that Hufflepuff and Gryffindor will be paired up this year," Albus handed over the new schedule. "I believe that Ravenclaw and Slytherin will make for a far more harmonious blend."

"I agree," Severus took the schedule and exited the room, still not once talking directly to Remus.

"As I said, awkward," Remus murmured softly. "He still hates me, doesn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," Albus said with dismay. "I've tried to get him to put the past behind him, but he can't."

"I almost killed him," Remus reminded Albus. "It's probably difficult for him to get past that."

"It wasn't your fault," Albus picked up Remus' class schedule. "And despite his dislike of you, right now I need you both."

"I'll do my best to keep out of his way," Remus took the schedule. "I already know where my rooms are."

"Then I'll see you later at the Feast," Albus said.

"You're announcing Harry's death then?" Remus tried to keep his voice even as he spoke.

"It won't be easy, but it has to be done," Albus opened the door for Remus just as the same instrument that had announced Severus' presence began chiming again. Suspecting who it might be, Albus ignored it and continued speaking. "Amelia is going to announce it to the press early tonight, and it will no doubt be making headlines in the Prophet for weeks to come."

Remus stepped through the door. "I don't envy you."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the woman coming up the staircase apologized as she ran into Remus. "Professor McGonagall pointed me in this direction."

"I'm Professor Lupin," Remus couldn't decide if the young looking woman was a student or the sibling of a student.

"Lucy Viking," Lucy introduced herself. "I'm going to be working here as from Monday."

"Miss Viking, do come in," Albus invited.

"Please call me Lucy," Lucy then wondered if she'd made a mistake. "If that's allowed."

"I'd be delighted to call you Lucy," Albus assured the young woman. "Remus, Lucy is here to act as a coach for the girls who were petrified while they catch up. She was recommended by Madam Bones."

Remus was rather taken aback to find that the woman was actually old enough to be a teacher. "My apologies for not introducing myself properly. I believed you to be a student."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Lucy stepped into Albus' office. "Wow, this is amazing."

"One of Harry's favorite words," slipped out of Albus' mouth before he could help himself.

Lucy's face fell at the mention of Harry. "Amelia told me that you're making an announcement tonight. He was a nice boy."

"You knew him?" Remus asked out of surprise.

"He's stayed with Amelia and Susan, and I usually take care of Susan when Amelia is in work so I met him then," Lucy explained. "Did you know him as well?"

"I'm afraid not," Remus glossed over his knowledge of Harry. "But I would have liked to." He gave a sad smile. "Then again, I'm sure most of the wizarding world will be saying the same."

"I expect so," Lucy agreed, before getting back to why she was there. "So, is there anything you need from me before I go to my rooms?"

"No, but I have something for you," Albus headed over to his desk and picked up a piece of parchment. "This is the girls' schedule. They will all be attending normal Defense classes, and Miss Granger will be attending Muggle Studies but as for their other classes, they will need your help to bring them up-to-date with their fellow students, so that they can rejoin them sometime next year. Obviously, except for Defense, Susan will probably not do so until fifth year."

Lucy quickly perused the schedule. "That's quite a lot of lessons, but I'm aware of what Amelia has agreed with you for Miss Lovegood and Miss Granger."

"I thought you might be," Albus knew that Lucy was discreetly referring to the timeturners that the girls had been issued. "Now, if you will both excuse me, I'm afraid I have a speech to write."

"I'll escort Lucy to her rooms," Remus stood to one side to let Lucy leave. "After you."

"Thank you," Albus closed the door after the departing couple, and turned back to his desk to begin the difficult task of writing what he was going to say about Harry.

A few days later

Hannah walked over to Justin. "Sorry, but I'm having problems with this arithmancy question. Can you help me?"

Justin looked at the problem that Hannah was working on. "Of course I can. But we'll need to go to the library. I've already handed my homework in, and you'll need Jones on Arithmancy."

"Can Susan come as well?" Hannah asked hesitantly.

"I'm friends with both of you," Justin could see Susan looking hopefully in his direction. "And after what's happened, I think it's important to stick together."

Hannah beckoned to Susan, who smiled at Justin. "Thanks. I wasn't sure how you would take me."

"You were sitting with us before you were petrified, so why worry now?" Justin questioned Susan's reticence.

"Because of what happened to Harry," Susan teared up as she always did when she thought about her former friend. "He still wasn't exactly comfortable around me, and I didn't know if you'd hold that against me."

"He went to visit you with Hannah almost every day," Justin reminded the girl. "And I firmly believe that if this hadn't happened, we'd have all been sitting together now."

Hannah shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not so sure about that."

"You mean because of Harry and Ginny?" Justin kept his voice low so that it wouldn't carry over to Ginny who was sitting in front of the fire with Meredith.

"Can we talk outside?" Hannah didn't want to risk Ginny overhearing.

"We have to go to the library anyway," Justin picked up his bag and accompanied the two girls. "So now we're outside, are you going to answer my question?"

"The answer is yes!" Hannah said in a defiant voice, before going on angrily, "I know Harry's dead but I still can't believe I was stupid enough to think that he might like me." She then remembered that Susan had liked Harry as well. "Sorry, but I really did like him."

"That's okay," Susan would have rather Harry went out with Hannah than Ginny, but it appeared that that hadn't been the case.

"Harry did like you," Justin tried to console Hannah. "But then things changed."

"You mean because I was petrified?" Hannah couldn't help but still feel hurt, as to her it seemed only like yesterday that she and Harry had been spending time together.

"Yes," Justin gave a gentle smile. "It isn't easy dealing with someone who can't talk back to you. It certainly affected my relationship with Luna."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out between the two of you," Susan commiserated with him. "But like Hannah, I still can't believe that Harry went out with Ginny."

"It came as a bit of a surprise to me as well," Justin admitted. "One minute he said that they were just friends, and then the next they were snogging all the time."

Hannah winced. "Thanks."

"Sorry," Justin apologized immediately.

"It's okay," Hannah knew that Justin hadn't meant to upset her. "I'm just glad I didn't have to see them together."

Susan, as usual, couldn't help but ask. "Did they really snog all the time?"

Justin pulled a face. "Yes. When Harry was with Ginny they spent most of their time together holding hands and telling each other how much they loved each other."

"Loved?" Hannah asked in shock.

"Yeah, it drove me mad," Justin wondered what was wrong when Susan grabbed his arm. "What's up?"

"Let me get this straight," Susan said. "Harry originally only liked Ginny as a friend?"

"Yes, Justin just said that," Hannah reminded Susan.

Susan acknowledged that, and then asked another question. "And they dated for less than a week?"

Justin quickly thought back. "Yes."

Susan had yet another question. "And when he and Ginny were together he was all over her?"

"Yes, as I've just told you," Justin said slowly. "Where are you going with this?"

"Bear with me," Susan pleaded. "And he told her he loved her?"

"Yes. Almost ad nauseam," Justin wished Susan would just get to the point. "Why?"

"Because I think Harry was under a love spell or a potion!" Susan declared.

Justin laughed but stopped when Susan didn't join in. "You're kidding, right?"

Susan shook her head. "I once overheard Aunt Amy telling Lucy about an Auror who used a love potion on his girlfriend because she was going to dump him. I've always been a bit of a romantic and I thought it was quite sweet but when I asked Lucy about it..."

Hannah interrupted. "Did you get into trouble for eavesdropping?"

"Yes, but that's beside the point," Susan said urgently. "Now as I was saying, when I asked Lucy about it, she said it was a crime to use some love potions, such as Amortentia or Aestustentia."

"Why?" Justin asked, interested in what Susan had to say.

"Because they rob a person of freewill," Susan explained. "Which makes them almost as bad as the Imperious curse."

"And what makes you think Ginny used one of these potions on Harry?" Hannah was just as interested.

"He liked Hannah one minute from what you said, didn't want Ginny as more than a friend, and then suddenly he started saying he was in love with Ginny as soon as he started going out with her," Susan snorted. "Not likely. We dated for almost two months, and the most he said to me was that he really liked me."

"That doesn't mean he didn't love Ginny," Justin argued.

"Trust me, I know I'm right," Susan said forcefully. "I bet she used a potion on Harry."

"How do you think she got the potion, if she did?" Justin wasn't entirely behind Susan's theory.

"She's a potions trainee, isn't she?" Susan reminded Justin. "I bet she could have easily brewed it."

"But how do we prove it?" Justin asked the obvious question.

"I don't know. I'd have to tell Aunt Amy," Susan declared. "And she could take it from there."

"But what if you're wrong?" Hannah, like Justin, wanted to believe in Susan's theory, but she didn't want her friend biting off more than she could chew.

"Then I'd apologize," Susan gave Hannah and Justin a wry smile. "It wouldn't be the first time I've done that."

"I don't know," Hannah was still hesitant. "What do you think, Justin?"

"I don't think it's a good idea," Justin agreed with Hannah. "Harry's gone, so why does it matter now?"

"Because if Ginny Weasley tricked him, then she should be punished," Susan said firmly.

Justin shook his head. "I think we should just let things lie. It could make life awkward for you if you accuse Ginny of something she isn't guilty of."

"But what if she is guilty?" Susan countered.

"It would be almost impossible to prove," Hannah argued. "So I think we should do what Justin suggests and let it go."

Susan scowled, convinced she was right. "But..."

Hannah placed a hand on Susan's arm. "I know you're doing this because you think it would make me feel better to know that Harry had really liked me, and he only went out with Ginny because of a potion. But you can't prove it, and it will just be digging up trouble if you're wrong. Please, Susan, let it go."

Susan slumped. "Alright, but I'm still going to mention it to Aunt Amy if I go home at Christmas."

"I bet she'll say the same," Justin said as he opened the library door. "Come on, let's get this work done."

And Susan had little choice except to drop the subject.

Later that week

Justin reluctantly headed for Defense. "Please let this Lupin fellow be better than Lockhart."

"Well, he's probably not going to try and kill one of us," Hannah said in a hopeful voice. "At least I hope not."

"So do I," Justin agreed in a dry tone, and followed his friend into class. As soon as he walked into the classroom, he found the teacher's eyes were upon him. He turned and whispered to Hannah. "What is he looking at?"

"He probably knows you were Harry's friend," Hannah whispered back, and sat down next to Justin.

"Just great," Justin glared at the teacher. "He's probably going to turn out to be another sycophantic idiot."

"Just give him a chance," Susan hissed under her breath, as she sat down on the other side of him.

At the front of the classroom, Remus gave no indication that he had heard the children's conversation, merely transferring his attention to the other students who were piling into the classroom. Once everyone was seated, he began. "Good afternoon. My name is Professor Lupin, and I will be your Defense teacher for this year, and hopefully the one after."

Hermione flashed Remus a bright smile; she had immediately taken to the tired looking man when she had met him briefly in the Headmaster's office.

Remus decided to make the most of the friendly smile, and pointed to Hermione. "Miss Granger, can you please tell me in brief what you covered during last year?"

Numerous sniggers could be heard at the question, and Remus frowned. "Would anyone care to enlighten me as to what is so amusing about my question?"

Justin was hardly surprised to see everyone looking anywhere but at the teacher, and he gave a sigh and put up his hand.

Remus pointed to him. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

Noting that the teacher knew his name, Justin kicked Hannah under the desk to underscore the comment he'd made on entering the classroom, before sarcastically answering. "What we learned about defense could be summed up in one word – nothing!"

Hermione turned around, and berated her friend. "Justin, don't be so rude!"

"Miss Granger, would you concur?" Remus put Hermione on the spot, forcing her to turn round and face the front of the classroom.

"Not exactly. I did learn how to freeze and capture Cornish Pixies," Hermione announced to more sniggering.

"Anything else?" Remus asked.

Ron put up his hand, and after being asked to do so, he identified himself. "Ron Weasley, Sir."

"So what did you learn, Mr. Weasley?" Remus wondered whether this student would be brave enough to follow Justin's belligerent example.

He was. "Nothing about defense, Sir. But I did learn about Lockhart's ambitions, his favorite colors, and how to deal with fame."

Remus' lips twitched involuntarily, and he struggled to hold back a laugh. After a second he responded, "Well, it looks as though I have my work cut out for me. We'll skip the introduction, and the chapter on Cornish Pixies, so please turn to page 30."

The students dutifully opened their books at the required page to discover that it was a piece on the yeti, and several of them groaned. Remus knew exactly why. "There will be no playacting in this classroom, just study."

The class soon settled down, and they quickly discovered that unlike Lockhart, Remus actually knew what he was talking about.

At the end of the lesson, Justin was a bit happier leaving the classroom than when he'd gone in. "At least he seems to have some idea how to teach, so I suppose he might be alright. But I still don't like the way he was looking at me."

"Justin, he barely looked at you all class," Hannah pointed out. "Give him a break. He's probably a little star struck. I mean it's not every

day he meets a boy who was friends with someone as famous as Harry."

Inside his classroom, Remus couldn't help but let out a shout of laughter at the comment, which carried to the children's ears. Justin turned to his friends, his eyebrows raised. "He might be an okay teacher but I have the feeling that he might be barking mad."

"Just because he laughed out loud doesn't mean that he's insane," Hermione immediately defended Remus.

"Are you crushing on this Defense teacher as well?" Justin couldn't help but tease the girl.

"No," Hermione denied as she went red. "I just think we should give him a chance."

Susan sided with Hermione. "He seemed alright to me."

"You didn't see him staring at me," Justin remarked. "It was creepy."

"As Hannah has already said, you were Harry's best friend, and he probably knows that," Hermione said sensibly.

"Well, as long as he's not fishing for information for a book like Lockhart, then I suppose he's alright," Justin still didn't like the teacher much, and he changed the subject. "Come on, I'm starving, and it's supposed to be pork chops tonight."

"You're worse than Ron," Hermione chided her friend.

"I heard that," Ron yelled after the three departing students.

Justin turned around grinning as he ran. "You were supposed to." He still had to duck to miss the book Ron hurled at him.

30th September 1994

Tom looked around in dismay at the shabby appearance of the house. "I can't use magic on this; it would degrade too quickly. We definitely need an influx of money."

"Something I can arrange," Lucius stepped up to stand by the dark-haired young man.

"Severus said you would be able to do so," Tom walked into the dining room. "I killed my father and grandparents in here."

Lucius was surprised by the bluntness of the statement, even though he was already very much aware of the fact. "I know."

"This should have been mine," Tom walked over to the grandfather clock that had longed stopped ticking. "All of this."

Lucius watched as Tom wound the mechanism to set the clock going. "It is quite an estate by Muggle standards."

"It's quite an estate by wizarding standards," Tom had been to Lucius' home, and knew only too well why Lucius had made the comment. "Not everyone is as rich as you."

"True," Lucius admitted. "And I have yet to use Narcissa's dowry. I was intending to give it to Draco when he marries, but under the circumstances, I do believe that he would be amenable if I used some of it to bring this place more in line with what Lord Voldemort would want."

"Have you had any luck in tracking him or your sister-in-law down yet?" Tom turned to face Lucius.

"There are rumors that they are both somewhere in Romania or France, depending upon who you talk to," Lucius had had agents trying to find them. "But so far nothing concrete."

"Why do you think Lestrage escaped now?" Tom headed towards the stairs.

"I have no idea," Lucius had talked it over with Narcissa, but neither of them had any idea of why.

"And how do you think she did it?" Tom made his way up the creaking staircase.

"Two people were found murdered, so I'd say she feigned her illness, and overpowered them," Lucius guessed. "She always was resourceful."

"And loyal according to Severus," Tom opened the first door he came to. "The master suite."

"It's an adequate size," Lucius walked past Tom into the bathroom. "I do believe that you will need to modernize though."

"I need someone I can trust to undertake the work," Tom pulled a face at the antiquated bathroom. "You are supplying the funding, can you also supply a renovator?"

"I know just the person," Lucius brushed imaginary dirt off of his shirt sleeve. "A designer named Aditi Nessa. She's very discreet, a former Death Eater, and a friend."

"Then make it so," Tom decided to entrust the updates to Lucius. "I want it done before Christmas."

"Do you think you'll have tracked Lord Voldemort down by then?" Lucius asked.

"It doesn't make any difference if I do or not," Tom made his way further along the corridor. "I cannot abide living in Severus' home for much longer." Tom turned at the sound of a voice. "It looks as though we have company. Deal with it."

"Of course," Lucius turned and headed downstairs. "Good morning."

"Who let you in?" an old man demanded to know.

"I let myself in," Lucius could hear footsteps behind him. "I was escorting the heir to this property around it."

"There is no heir," the old man snapped. "The Riddles are all dead and buried."

"Not this one," Tom stepped into the dim light. "I'm Tom Riddle. And you are?"

The old man paled. "Are you a ghost?"

"No, I'm not," Tom was rather amused by how frightened the man was. "Who did you think I was?"

"The Master," the old man managed to get past his terrified lips. "But he's been gone for years."

"So have I in a manner of speaking," Tom walked forward until he was in front of the man. "But now I'm back."

The old man recovered somewhat when he noticed how young Tom was. "This is some sort of trick. You're too young to be a Riddle." He scowled. "I'm fed up of you kids messing up this house."

"It's my house, and you still haven't told me your name," Tom said in a menacing voice.

"It's none of your business," the old man, who was named Frank, turned away. "I'm going to call the police."

"I can't have that," Tom said softly. "Lucius, if you wouldn't mind?"

Lucius pulled out his wand as the old man turned around. "You should have stayed away, Muggle."

"Muggle?" Frank questioned the term. "Is that a new swear word?"

"It means that you're non-magical," Lucius aimed his wand. "Something I don't suffer from. Avada Kedavra."

Frank didn't get a chance to defend himself as the spell hit him, and he collapsed onto the ground. Tom sighed as he stepped over the body. "I'll need to have wards erected to hide this place. I can't have Muggles dropping in to investigate all the time. Deal with the body."

Lucius turned his wand on the body and within moments it had burnt to little more than ashes. "Are we finished here?"

"Yes," Tom nodded. "Contact your designer, and then let me have her ideas when she has seen the place."

Lucius didn't get a chance to respond as Tom vanished.

France

Bellatrix bowed low before the repulsive, baby-like individual that was cradled in a chair. "Louis will be bringing your nourishment shortly, my Lord."

Voldemort expected nothing less. "Good. How goes your research?"

"I believe I may have found a ritual to bring you back," Bellatrix had been toiling relentlessly through the Lestrange family library ever since she had found her Master.

"Well, do you ever intend to tell me about it?" Voldemort asked impatiently.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I will do so immediately," Bellatrix apologized. "The ritual requires three things: bone from your father, an unwilling sacrifice of blood from an enemy, and a willing sacrifice of flesh from your servant."

"And are you willing to sacrifice a piece of your flesh for me, Bellatrix?" Voldemort queried.

"Of course, my Lord," Bellatrix assured him.

Knowing Bellatrix as he did, Voldemort believed her. "Bone of my father will be easy to obtain; Severus knows where he is buried, and you will contact him to arrange it."

"And what about blood of your enemy?" Bellatrix asked about the final component.

"I would have liked to have used Potter's blood, but since he is dead that will be impossible now," Voldemort had been delighted when he had heard of the boy's demise. "So I think that Dumbledore will be my target."

"He's impossible to get to," Bellatrix pointed out.

"Not as impossible as you might think," Voldemort responded. "The Longbottom boy will help me."

"Longbottom?" Bellatrix almost screeched the name. "His entire family is light."

"He's helped me once before," Voldemort revealed. "And with what I have to offer him, he will help me again."

"But..." Bellatrix began, only for Voldemort to cut off her.

"You dare challenge my word, Bellatrix?" Voldemort believed in keeping his servants in line.

"No, my Lord," Bellatrix immediately lowered her head as she spoke.

"Good," Voldemort snapped. "Now go find that useless boy and bring me my milk."

"Yes, my Lord," Bellatrix hurriedly left the room.

October 31st 1994

Severus sat down. "I cannot stay long. I need to return to Hogwarts."

"What news do you have for me?" Tom immediately asked.

"Lestrage contacted me," Severus revealed. "She wanted me to go to Riddle Manor and obtain bone from Lord Voldemort's father."

"Do you know where they are?" Tom asked with interest.

Severus shook his head. "I was simply instructed to obtain the bone, and to keep it until an owl arrived for it."

"And have you obtained it?" Tom queried.

"Yes, I sent it two days ago," Severus revealed.

"So why did you not come to me then?" Tom asked, more than a little annoyed.

"Because I didn't have to leave Hogwarts to get the bone," Severe explained. "I still had a sample left from a potion I once made for Lord Voldemort to enhance his strength."

"So he must be weak if he needs the bone now," Tom surmised Voldemort's need for the bone incorrectly. "I'll have Lucius try and track them down. Was that everything?"

"No," Severus shook his head. "I thought you should know that Granger and Lovegood have asked to be allowed to search for the Chamber again. They still believe Potter to be alive."

"Alive?" Tom questioned Severus' statement.

"They have worked out that it was a Basilisk in the Chamber, and they are hoping that Potter is still alive, but petrified," Severus revealed. "Granger also worked out that it was Shakira who killed Diggory, and that you ripped out the heart of Moaning Myrtle after she was killed."

"And Dumbledore went along with this idea?" Tom queried.

Severus nodded, and begrudgingly made a comment. "Granger is extremely intelligent, and Dumbledore put enough stock in her idea to contact Bones to re-open both cases."

"So is Dumbledore going to let them search for the Chamber?" Tom questioned.

"Yes. He's agreed to let them and Potter's other friends stay over Easter," Severus informed him.

"Which friends?" Tom asked.

Severus listed them for him. "What are you going to do?"

"I going to persuade them to reconsider their search," Tom decided. "If Granger is right, and Potter is still alive and petrified in the Chamber, then I want him kept there."

"But no-one else speaks Parseltongue, and the Chamber is sealed," Severus pointed out.

"I wouldn't put it past your Miss Granger to find a way, especially if she's as clever as you say she is," Tom got up. "I think for my plan to work a little reconnaissance is called for."

"What do you want me to do?" Severus immediately offered.

"I will find out what I need to know myself," Tom informed him. "I'm bored, and this will give me something to do. You may go."

Severus bowed slightly, and then left, Tom also leaving immediately behind him.

Next Chapter: Tom searches out Harry's friends; Justin's parents give Tom important information; Albus moves up the timetable in the search for Harry.

Chapter 34: A Change of Plans

3rd November 1994

Azkaban

Sirius sauntered casually up to the cell door. "Good morning, Minister."

"Black," Cornelius scowled at him. "What do you want?"

Sirius was rather surprised by the Minister's attitude. Even though he was a prisoner, they were usually fairly amenable towards each other, but not this time. "Is something wrong?"

"If there was, it would be none of your business," Dolores Umbridge, who as usual was accompanying Cornelius, barked out. Her voice then became oily and obsequious. "Minister, we have better things to do than to waste our time here."

"Quite," Cornelius agreed. "Let us proceed."

"Before you go, may I have the newspaper?" Sirius asked, spotting it sticking out of Cornelius' briefcase.

Cornelius didn't get a chance to answer as Dolores replied in his stead. "Absolutely not. It's bad enough that Harry Potter is dead without allowing you a newspaper to gloat over your triumph." As had been the case since Harry's death had been announced, there was a story about him in that day's paper.

Sirius took a step back as if struck. "Dead?"

"Don't act as if you don't know," Dolores didn't believe Sirius' surprised act, and she turned away and once more addressed Cornelius. "Minister, we need to get going, otherwise we will be late for your next appointment."

Cornelius didn't look at Sirius, and following Dolores, he headed off to check on the other inmates of the high security area.

In his cell, Sirius dropped onto his bed, his head in his hands. He was so lost in grief that he didn't notice when, ten minutes later,

Dolores and Cornelius passed by his cell. He did, however, take note that the Dementors had been released, the cold of their presence seeping into his bones, and a plan began to form in his mind.

As the Dementors entered, Sirius quickly switched to his animagus form. After the Dementors had passed by to take their fill of the wretched souls in the cells beyond his own, instead of lying down on the bed as he usually did, Sirius instead squeezed through the bars of his cell. And when the Dementors returned, despite wanting nothing more than to run and hide from the cold, dismal feeling, Sirius padded out with them, hidden by their dark cloaks, safe from the eyes of the guards who were all keeping a very safe distance.

Hogwarts

Luna got up and walked over to Justin. "Can you come and help me with something?"

"Of course I can," Justin put down his quill and headed over to Luna's desk. "What's up?"

"I want you to ask Hannah out," Luna said straightforwardly. "I can see you looking at her all the time."

Justin colored. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Justin, you won't hurt me if you go out with her," Luna assured him. "I'm over you, and one day I will find the right Hufflepuff for me."

"I still don't know how you know you'll marry someone from Hufflepuff," Justin found Luna's belief rather strange.

"I just do," Luna gave him a sweet smile. "Just like I know that you and Hannah will make a perfect couple."

"You're trying to marry us off?" Justin asked in alarm.

"I can't tell that with you but I can see you like each other," Luna twirled her quill in the air, tickling Justin on the nose. "And I can see that she doesn't like me talking to you, and playing like this."

Justin couldn't help but look behind him. Luna was right, Hannah wasn't looking too happy. "What if I ask her out and she says no?"

"I knew you liked her!" Luna pounced on the implication of the question, ignoring the content of it. "And she obviously likes you. So go ask her out. And then come back here and help me with question ten."

Hannah watched a red-faced Justin heading her way. "Did you help Luna?"

"Not yet," Justin could see that Susan was listening intently. "Hannah, can I talk to you?"

"Go ahead," Hannah thought Justin was acting rather strangely.

"Erm, alone?" Justin didn't want a witness in case Luna was wrong and Hannah said no.

"Come to the back of the library," Hannah got up, and then she headed towards one of the window seats at the back. "Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Justin wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. "I, uh, I wondered if you wanted to go to Hogsmeade with me on Sunday?"

"You mean to celebrate your birthday?" Hannah asked, crossing her fingers in the hope that Justin would say no - they had always gotten along well, and ever since she had returned to school, they had only gotten closer, so now she was hoping that he was actually asking her out.

Turning redder than he already was, Justin shook his head. "Not exactly. I meant just the two of us."

"I'd love to," Hannah uncrossed her fingers, and smiled, before remembering that she had already made plans. "I totally forgot. I've already promised Susan that I would go to Hogsmeade with her."

Aware that students had to go in groups of two or more to Hogsmeade for reasons of safety, Justin did the gentlemanly thing, and offered to include Susan. "We can all go together."

Hannah was a little disappointed that she and Justin wouldn't be alone but she also knew that it would be wrong to push Susan aside just because she now had a boyfriend. "Thanks for understanding."

The pair of them headed back to the desks at the front of the library, and Justin walked over to Luna. "I can help you with that problem now."

"Did you ask her?" Luna asked bluntly.

"Yes, and she said yes," Justin sat down. "But Susan is coming with us. Hannah had already promised to go to Hogsmeade with her."

"I'm sure Susan will let you two have some time alone," Luna had gotten to know the Hufflepuff quite well, even though they only had Divination together. "And besides, I'm going with them as well."

"Hannah didn't mention that," Justin was already checking over Luna's work as he spoke.

"That's because she doesn't know yet," Luna grinned. "I was going with Ron and Neville but I think it would be better if I came along with you. I can walk back with Susan at the end of day."

"This is where you're going wrong," Justin pointed out the mistake Luna had made. "And thank you."

"That's what friends are for," Luna squeezed Justin's knee, making him jump. She gave a giggle as he jumped up, and rejoined his fellow Hufflepuffs.

Hermione frowned at her friend. "I saw that."

"I was just teasing him," Luna gave a wicked smile, before resuming her usual pleasant look. "And before you ask again, yes, I'm over him."

"If that's true, then you do know that Neville likes you, don't you?" Hermione had seen her fellow Gryffindor throwing Luna some very obvious looks.

"But he's not a Hufflepuff," Luna pointed out, more than a little glad that she had reconsidered who she would go to Hogsmeade with,

especially now that she knew about Neville. "So it would never work out between us."

"Luna, you can't date people from only one house," Hermione said in exasperation.

"I can do what I want to," Luna stuck out her tongue. "And that's why I'm helping Justin."

Hermione shook her head in surprise. "Most people wouldn't be so nice to their ex-boyfriends."

"It just wasn't meant to be, and I don't want to lose another friend," Luna declared. "And besides, I know that one day my own Hufflepuff will sweep me off my feet."

Hermione watched Luna drift off into a daydream, ostensibly about her mystery Hufflepuff. Hermione waited a few minutes for her to snap out of it but when she didn't, Hermione nudged her. "Luna, until a Hufflepuff does come along to sweep you off your feet, I suggest you concentrate and get your homework done, otherwise you'll be twenty before you graduate!"

"Okay then," Luna quickly made the change Justin had suggested, and rolled up her parchment. "Finished. Can I go look for Hufflepuffs now?"

Hermione couldn't help herself and burst out laughing. "You are terrible."

"But you love me anyway," Luna blew her friend a kiss, and skipped out of the library.

16th November 1994

Severus heard a noise and started. Then he cursed himself; the full moon wasn't up for a few days, but his former experience with Lupin and knowing that he was there on the grounds, had meant that Severus' more recent journeys into the Forest Forbidden to collect plants this close to the full moon weren't entirely comfortable. As the

rustle came again, Severus looked down, and almost fell off his broomstick in shock.

In the undergrowth below, Sirius had no idea that he was being watched. He just knew that somehow he had to get into Hogwarts to see Albus to find out what had happened to Harry. He therefore didn't see the spell that came from above and hit him, sending him hurtling unconscious to the ground.

Severus landed beside Sirius, staring down at his former childhood nemesis, who was lying prone on the ground. He aimed his wand at the unconscious man, toying with the idea that he could just kill him rather than handing him back to the authorities. Then a better notion presented itself; he could hand Black over to Tom. Severus knew that it would make him seem even more loyal, as well as elevating him above Lucius in Tom's eyes. After giving Sirius a vicious kick to the head, Severus cast a spell to float him along until they reached the edge of the school wards, and then they both disappeared.

18th November 1994

Virginia Granger smiled at her next patient. "Tom Mortimer?"

The dark-haired young man smiled at the stunning woman who had greeted him. "You're Dr. Granger?"

"Yes, but so is my husband," Virginia slipped on a pair of white gloves. "When was your last check-up, Mr. Mortimer?"

"Call me Tom," Tom smiled at her, and responded to her question before opening his mouth. "It's been a while."

"Let's see then," Virginia checked each tooth carefully, before bringing his chair into an upright position. "Well, it looks as though you take excellent care of your teeth, Tom. There's absolutely no sign of any decay or tartar build-up. I wish more patients were as fastidious as you."

"I do my best," Tom got up. "I'm sorry but you look very familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?"

Virginia decided that the young man was flirting with her, and she shook her head. "I doubt it."

"Do you have any children?" Tom pushed.

Virginia suddenly felt her hackles go up. "Why?"

Tom recognized her defensive posture, and immediately spoke to counteract it. "You remind me of one of the girls from my school." He suddenly snapped his fingers. "I should have realized. Is Hermione Granger your daughter?"

Virginia turned to her assistant. "Melanie, if you could give me a moment?" Virginia waited for Melanie to leave before asking her next question, but even then she still didn't confirm that Hermione was her daughter. "What school do you go to?"

Tom smiled engagingly. "I attended Hogwarts."

Virginia visibly relaxed. "Sorry, but you can't be too careful. Yes, Hermione's my daughter. Were you a Gryffindor?"

"No, Slytherin," Tom could see that Virginia had heard about the different houses. "And we're not as bad as we're drawn, at least some of us aren't. I was sorry to hear about Hermione's accident."

Virginia sucked in her breath. "Thank you, but at least she's alright now." She turned at a knock at the door. "Come in."

Lester Granger stuck his head around the door. "Sorry to disturb you, but I just wanted to say that your last patient has cancelled, so you can leave when you've finished here."

Virginia turned to Tom. "Lester, this is Tom Mortimer. He attended Hogwarts, and knows Hermione. He came in for a check-up."

"Don't you have spells for that sort of thing?" Lester asked, recalling Hermione mentioning something to him before.

"We do but it doesn't hurt to get back-up," Tom held out his hand, deciding that he knew everything he needed to. "Dr. Granger, it was very pleasant to meet you."

Lester shook hands with the polite young man. "You too, Mr. Mortimer."

Tom took Virginia's hand and surprised her by brushing a kiss over her knuckles. "Dr. Granger, thank you."

Lester shared a stunned look with his wife as the young man left the office. "What was all that about?"

"I have no idea," Virginia shrugged. "Hermione said something about purebloods and the like having old-fashioned manners."

"But didn't she also say that they don't like Muggles like us?" Lester couldn't put his finger on why the kiss had disturbed him so much.

Virginia berated her husband. "You can't tar them all with the same brush, Lester, it isn't right."

"I suppose not," Lester frowned. "So does he know what happened to Hermione?"

"Yes," Virginia nodded, and then she sighed at the look on her husband's face. "I suppose you still think it's my fault, don't you?"

"I never wanted her to go to that damned school in the first place," Lester reminded his wife.

"It was better that than having uncontrolled magic ripping through the house. You know as well as I do that she couldn't control it," Virginia held up her hand as her husband went to open his mouth again. "Lester, this is an old subject, and nothing we say is going to change what happened."

"I know that," Lester said in a disgusted voice. "Just as you know that I didn't want her to go back, especially not two days early to search for some dead kid. We barely saw her all summer."

"Harry was her friend, and she was doing what she thought was for the best," Virginia defended her decision to let Hermione return early.

"But it wasn't what I thought was best," Lester reminded his wife. "You know how I feel about that place."

"But Hermione loves it there, Lester," Virginia countered.

"I don't care if she loves it or not. I said no to her returning, and you overrode me, so if anything happens to our daughter, I'll hold you responsible," Lester responded irritably.

Virginia was fed up with arguing about Hogwarts and Hermione, and she simply shrugged her shoulders. "If it makes you happy to blame me, then you do that."

Lester gave her a look of disgust. "Don't worry, I will." He then turned and headed out of the room.

Virginia cringed as her husband slammed the door. Things between them had been bad enough before Hermione's accident, now they had spiraled into distrust and, on her husband's side, obvious dislike.

Shakily Virginia walked out of the room and headed for her office. Once inside, she pulled open a drawer in the walnut cabinet that flanked the white wall. Taking out a packet, she slid the papers out, and sat down at the desk that matched the cabinet. After a few moments, she picked up a pen and began to sign the papers where indicated. Then she replaced them in the packet, before picking up her coat and jacket and locking the door.

As Virginia closed the door, Tom apparated out of the Grangers' practice, his invisibility and silencing spells holding firm. He then found a quiet spot, and vanished, reappearing at the end of a very long gated driveway, where he dropped both spells, before making his way over to where an intercom was built into one of the stone pillars that flanked the gates. After trying to work out how to open the gates, Tom finally realized that he needed to press the intercom button, and after doing so, he gave his name when prompted. The gates swung open, and Tom began the long walk up the driveway.

When he reached the house, he made his way up the marble steps, and knocked on the door. It was flung open by a tall, angry looking man, "Yes?"

"I'm here about the..." Tom didn't get any further before the man interrupted him.

"The servant's entrance is around the side," the man snapped, before slamming the door shut.

Tom's smile disappeared from his face until the door re-opened and a very plain brunette in black trousers and a white shirt came out of the door. Tom guessed she had to be a servant of some kind. She smiled an apology at Tom. "I'm so sorry about that. I'll show you where to go."

"Thank you," Tom said politely. "I'm Tom Mortimer."

The woman bounced down the steps, introducing herself as she went. "I'm Cordelia. Come on it's this way."

Tom followed Cordelia around to a side door, and opened it for her. Once inside, when Cordelia came to a large, highly polished oak door, she tapped on it, and stuck her head around. "Tom Mortimer is here for his interview, Mrs. Blakeley."

"I'm afraid I'm running a little behind," a tall, thin woman with scraped back blonde hair responded. "Would you ask him to wait in the kitchen?"

"I'll show him around and bring him back to see you," Cordelia offered. "It will help save some time."

"I'd appreciate it, thank you," Marissa said before turning back to the interviewee who was with her.

Cordelia closed the door. "I hope you don't mind me showing you around."

"Not at all," Tom followed the willowy woman out of the kitchen. "So how many rooms does this place have?"

"There are twenty-four bedrooms and most of have en-suite bathrooms, two dining rooms, one kitchen, a ballroom, a library, a study, and a few other rooms," Cordelia went down the list. "Which position are you applying for?"

"Maintenance assistant," Tom responded, and asked a question he guessed someone who was genuinely applying would ask. "Do you know if that job title would cover all of the rooms?"

"It would," Cordelia nodded, before she smiled conspiratorially, and whispered. "It isn't a job I'd want."

Tom was encouraged by the woman's confidence, and he therefore asked about the man who had been so rude to him. "Is the owner usually around?"

"Only at the weekend," Cordelia responded.

"And his wife and children?" Tom followed Cordelia into one of the bedrooms.

"His wife is here all the time and they have one son, but he attends a boarding school in Scotland," Cordelia led the way into a bathroom. "Most of the rooms look like this with the same type of plumbing and all that."

"Okay," Tom barely spared the room a second glance, and continued to pry. "So it's the typical middle class set up then with the kid being bundled out of the way?"

"Absolutely not," Cordelia snapped, before apologizing. "Sorry, but I know how much Mrs. Finch-Fletchley loves her son. Justin has to attend boarding school because he has special needs."

Tom wanted as much information as possible, so he apologized, not wanting to lose Cordelia's confidence. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude."

Cordelia accepted his apology, and they then continued their tour, Tom asking probing questions, until Edmund Finch-Fletchley appeared at the end of the corridor, a piece of paper in his hand. "Cordelia, what are you doing?"

"Taking Mr. Mortimer around to save Marissa some time," Cordelia hadn't expected to run across her husband.

"We have servants for that sort of thing," Edmund barked out. "You should be getting ready to go out to dinner tonight."

"I have five hours until dinner," Cordelia protested.

Edmund hadn't bothered to look at the time. "You still shouldn't be wasting your time with the hired help. And besides, I want to see you about this letter."

Cordelia could feel Tom's eyes on her as she took the letter from Edmund. "I'll come to your study when I've finished showing Mr. Mortimer around."

"What's wrong with now?" Edmund snapped.

"I can't just leave him here," Cordelia pointed out.

"Get one of the other servants to show him to where he should be, and then I want to see you," Edmund stalked off as he finished speaking.

Cordelia turned around, her face bright red as she had to admit to her subterfuge. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was, and that you had to see that."

Tom now understood Cordelia's defense of her decision to send Justin to Hogwarts, but not her deception. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"It was nice not to have to be me for a short time," Cordelia answered cryptically, before changing the subject. "I'll show you back to the kitchen."

Tom followed Cordelia into the kitchen when they reached it, and he held out his hand. "Thank you for doing this."

"I'm sorry about not telling you who I was," Cordelia apologized again as she shook hands.

"I totally understand," Tom responded, more than aware he wasn't exactly being truthful about himself either.

"Good luck with the interview," Cordelia said and then she turned around and headed back out.

Tom looked around him before casting invisibility and silencing spells on himself. He had meant it when he had said to Severus that knowledge was everything, and he also believed that forearmed was

forewarned, especially given what had happened to Lord Voldemort. Catching up with Cordelia he followed her into Edmund's study.

Edmund looked up at his wife as she came in. "Shut the door."

Tom slipped in just before Cordelia closed the door. Once she had done so, Edmund started berating her. "Don't ever let me catch you fraternizing with servants like that again. You are supposed to be my wife, and I expect you to play that part."

Cordelia didn't tell Edmund that she considered most of the servants her friends. He was never there, and during the time he was away, she had grown to know all about their servants' families, their worries, and their hopes. And consequently because she treated them well, she was loved as much as Edmund was hated. "I'm sorry, Edmund."

"Just make sure it doesn't happen again," Edmund warned, before turning to the reason he had asked Cordelia to join him. "I'm not giving the boy permission to search for a dead boy. I want you to write to Justin and tell him that."

"But Harry might not be dead," Cordelia protested, the letter in her hand. "All Justin wants is permission to stay behind at Easter when the school closes. Please, Edmund, for me?"

Edmund sighed. Even though he had just lashed out at his wife for what he perceived as a weakness, he could refuse her little. "Fine, you can sign the form," Edmund agreed. "But if the search fails I won't be allowing him any more time to waste searching for that boy. It's not as if he had any useful connections."

Cordelia hated that her husband was all about association. "Edmund, just because Harry wasn't royalty..."

"Wasn't royalty?" Edmund snorted. "He wasn't anything. He lived in Little Whinging, which is hardly Belgravia. Justin was obviously embarrassed about that, otherwise he would have invited him to stay before now."

Cordelia could hardly tell Edmund that nothing was further from the truth, and she therefore went onto the other subject that Justin had brought up. "And what about Justin's other request?"

"I want to meet this girl's parents before I say yes to him gallivanting off with her family on a holiday," Edmund responded. "I need to know if she is a suitable match."

"Does it really matter?" Cordelia hated Edmund's conservative outlook. "Justin really likes her."

"I don't want the boy marrying someone without connections," Edmund came back.

"I very much doubt he's considering marriage yet," Cordelia said, before bringing up a very good point. "And even if he was, I don't see why connections matter so much. I didn't have any connections when you married me."

"That was different," Edmund got up. "And you weren't exactly unknown."

"I was just a model, Edmund," Cordelia reminded him of her former profession.

"A very beautiful and famous model," Edmund reminded her in turn. "And you had something I wanted."

"My son," Cordelia said softly.

Edmund came around the desk. "Cordelia, I married you because I wanted your love, and not for your child. I could have married anyone and adopted a child but I only wanted you."

"I know," Cordelia couldn't help but let a grimace cross her face as her husband moved behind her, and kissed the back of her neck.

It was a look that Tom didn't miss. Cordelia obviously didn't like her husband anymore than he did, and he was now intrigued as to exactly why she had married him. He didn't get to find out, as Edmund released Cordelia and told her to go and get ready.

Tom followed her out, thinking about what he'd just discovered. Edmund obviously wasn't Justin's birth father, and he found himself wondering who was. He also wondered if Justin's abilities had come his mother, for even though Cordelia herself wasn't a witch, Tom

knew she possessed a little magic herself; one of his talents being able to detect magical beings. Deciding to think about it later, he apparated out.

Spinner's End

Tom headed to sit down in front of the fire, his mind going over the two visits he'd paid that day. He absently glanced up when he heard a door opening. "Lucius, what are you doing here?"

"Narcissa is shopping," Lucius pulled a face. "So I thought I'd spare myself the agonies of having to accompany her, and also to give you the report from Aditi." In the middle of a job when Lucius had first contacted her, Aditi hadn't been able to get a chance to look over the house until then.

Tom took the report from Lucius, and after reading through it, he glanced up. "The house is riddled with woodworm?"

"She doesn't believe it would be worth treating," Lucius informed him, having already spoken to the woman. "She thinks you would do better just to tear it down and start again."

"I'll think about it," Tom wasn't pleased, but could do little about it. He therefore changed the subject. "How did your visits go yesterday?"

"I easily tracked down Bones' home," Lucius told him. "It's in the wizarding section of Barnett Street in London. There are some wards around it but nothing insurmountable."

"And Lovegood's workplace?" Tom asked.

"Nothing at all," Lucius said in a disdainful voice. "The place is a pigsty, and I do believe we will be doing the wizarding world a favor when we burn it down."

"Quite so," Tom smiled. "And Potter's relatives?"

"I have been unable to track them down at all," Lucius had to admit.

Tom smirked. "But I have. I managed to find out that they live in a town called Little Whinging. With that information, it shouldn't be too difficult to locate them."

Lucius was astonished. "How did you find that out?"

"I have my ways," Tom wasn't about to admit how he had discovered the information.

Lucius had to be satisfied with not knowing, and he asked after Tom's visits. "How did your own visits go?"

"I found Granger's parents' workplace, and I've also had a guided tour of Fletchley's home; it's rather large and grand for a Muggle," As he mentioned Justin's home, Tom had an idea. "Actually given that Riddle Manor isn't going to work out, I do believe that the Fletchley home would suit my purposes well."

"You intend to take it over?" Lucius asked.

"It needs a little work but I doubt as much as Riddle House, so yes, I'm thinking I will," Tom smiled in satisfaction at his idea.

Lucius could understand Tom's reasoning but he still curled up his lip. "Isn't it in a Muggle area?"

"It's quite secluded actually," Tom had been glad he could apparate; it would have been difficult getting there otherwise. "It's in the middle of the Gloucestershire countryside, and it makes Riddle Manor look small."

"It sounds reasonable," Lucius begrudgingly admitted.

"It's more than reasonable," Tom responded, before pulling a face. "Which is more than I can say for its current tenant. He's absolutely revolting."

"And his wife?" Lucius noticed that Tom didn't include her in his assessment.

"She's not exactly what I expected, and I found out that her son might not be the Muggleborn we believed him to be – his mother is

not exactly non-magical herself," Tom informed him. "In fact I believe she may be a squib."

"But even if that is the case, it doesn't make her of any use to us," Lucius pointed out.

"True, but in times of intense pressure, even squibs have been able to tap into the small amount of magic they possess, and use it," Tom reminded him. "So when we do attack, we will need to be on our guard when dealing with her."

"Do you intend to kill them?" Lucius asked.

"Of course, I need the house totally empty, and I can't have that if it's full of owners and Muggle servants," Tom responded. "And besides, I'm going to take pleasure in killing Fletchley. The man was discourteous towards me, and I intend that he will pay for that insult."

Lucius wasn't entirely surprised to hear that. "What about the Grangers?"

Tom decided that Lucius could deal with them. "When the time comes, you can kill them."

"So when do you plan to attack Fletchley's house?" Lucius asked, returning to the subject of Justin and his family home.

"Sooner rather than later, especially now that I have Sirius Black to blame my attack on," Tom began to mull over when would be good. "But first we need to discuss how recruitment is coming along..."

27th December 1994

The three children sat and listened to Albus. "We can search the bathroom?"

"If you wish to," Albus informed Ron. "But the catch is that the search will have to take place during Harry's memorial."

All three children had wanted to attend, but faced with the choice of doing so, or searching for Harry, they all knew that they would

choose looking for Harry. Susan acknowledged this choice. "I want to search for Harry." And George and Ron both agreed with her.

"Very well. Professor Viking has said that if you wanted to conduct the search, then she will stay behind at the school while the memorial is being held to monitor what you are doing," Albus explained. "Professor Snape is also going to be here if there are any problems."

"He's not going to Harry's memorial?" George asked with an innocent look on his face.

"I have to leave a skeleton staff behind, and he offered," Albus knew exactly what was behind the question. "I will remove the seal from the bathroom tomorrow morning, so you will have the entire day to search it. But I will be resealing the bathroom again the next day when those pupils attending Harry's memorial return." The pupils could have returned the same day but Albus had wanted to offer Susan and the Weasleys a chance to search for Harry.

Susan thought about their friends who weren't there. "But what about Luna and the others?"

"You may owl them, and if their parents agree, I will arrange for them to portkey to the school gates," Albus decided after a moment's thought. "But I do believe that Mr. Finch-Fletchley and Miss Abbott are a little too far away to return, and I doubt that the Abbotts would take kindly to us interrupting their holiday."

"I'll send owls straightaway," Susan got to her feet. "Thank you, Sir."

As the children filed out, Albus sat playing with the instrument he had shown to Luna at the start of the term. "I just hope they find you, my boy. I really do."

Glebe House, Kent

Hermione had returned home from Hogwarts to find the world a very different place than the one she had left. Her parents had shocked her with the news that they were getting a divorce, and she was therefore hating every moment of her Christmas holiday.

Lester was, at that moment, sitting with his daughter. "Hermione, I need to talk to you."

"About the divorce?" Hermione knew she sounded belligerent, but this happened to other people, not her parents.

"Yes, but it's about your place in it," Lester took his daughter's hand. "Hermione, I want you to come to live with me."

"But..." Hermione started to interrupt.

"Let me finish," Lester held up a hand to stop her. "I not only want you to come and live with me in my new home, but I also want you to leave Hogwarts and attend Combe Bank."

"I'm not leaving Hogwarts," Hermione immediately refused to consider attending the local private girls' school. "Daddy, I know you were upset about what happened, but the bathroom has been sealed off, and whatever attacked me can't do it again."

"But it could. You want permission to spend Easter there to look for a boy who is already dead," Lester pointed out.

"Daddy, Harry was someone very special," Hermione argued. "And I agree with Luna that there is a chance he might not be dead. I therefore want to spend Easter looking for him."

"Your mother said that you would say that," Lester met his daughter's gaze. "Hermione, getting back to our talk. You should know that your mother wants you to live with her here, and to attend Hogwarts. I want the opposite. You have to choose."

"Why can't I live with both of you; share my time?" Hermione asked in dismay.

"Because I can't deal with you attending that school," Lester was hoping that his empty threat would make Hermione reconsider. And he knew that he was going to hurt his daughter with his next words but he was more concerned about losing her than hurting her. "So if you choose Hogwarts, then you choose to cut me out of your life."

Hermione was absolutely horrified. "And if I choose you, what did Mummy say?"

Lester had to be honest; Virginia would only tell Hermione the truth if he wasn't. "She said that you are always welcome in her home no matter what choice you make."

"Then it's not fair of you to make me choose like this. Mummy isn't making me do it," Hermione declared.

"But I am," Lester hoped against hope that Hermione would capitulate his wishes.

She didn't. "I can't pick between you and Mummy, but I do know that I'm staying at Hogwarts."

"Then you've made your choice," Lester got up to leave. "I hope you'll be happy there."

As her father left the room, Hermione burst into tears, and over her sobs she could hear raised voices; her parents were obviously arguing again. A short time later, Lester came back in, a red handprint on his cheek evidence of what his wife had done. "Hermione, I owe you an apology. You don't have to choose. I just didn't want you to go back to that school."

"Did Mummy tell you to say that?" Hermione asked, tears still running down her cheeks.

"No, but she did say that I was an out and out bastard for doing this to you," Lester touched his cheek, his wife's words being backed up by her right hand. "And she's right. I should have found another way. But you have to see it from my point of view. Hermione, you're my only child, and I love you very much, and I know you want to go to Hogwarts. But I'm scared for you every second that you attend that school."

"Daddy, what happened was just one of those things. And if I thought it was really dangerous, then I wouldn't go back," Hermione smiled through her tears. "And besides, I love it there, and it would kill me to go back to a normal school."

"That's what your mother said," Lester sighed heavily. "And if you want to help find your friend at Easter, then you have my permission to stay behind."

"Thank you, Daddy," Hermione threw herself into her father's arms. "Thank you."

Their hug was disturbed by a tapping on the window. Hermione turned around. "That's Hedwig, Harry's owl; I mean Luna's owl." Hermione could see she'd confused her father. "Professor McGonagall gave her to Luna because Hedwig was pining without Harry, and Luna and Hedwig seem to get along well."

Hedwig tapped the window yet again.

"I think we'd better let her in," Lester opened the window, and the snowy owl flew to Hermione.

Hermione rummaged through her trunk, and pulled an owl treat out, feeding it to Hedwig as she took the letter that she was carrying from her. As the owl flew to settle on the end of Hermione's bed, Hermione turned to face Crookshanks, the unruly cat that her parents had bought her for Christmas, to warn her. "Leave Hedwig alone, Crookshanks."

Hedwig hooted softly in thanks, but didn't move even when the cat stared balefully at her. Hermione guessed that the owl had to be waiting for answer. "Daddy, I need to read this."

"Okay," Lester stared at the owl that was looking at him in the same way that Crookshanks was eyeing Hedwig. "I don't think he likes me."

"It's a she," Hermione said distractedly, before lowering the letter. "With Harry's memorial taking place tomorrow, all of the students are attending, and they won't be returning to Hogwarts until the day afterwards. The Headmaster has therefore agreed to let some of us search the bathroom during the memorial. Can I go back early rather than going to Harry's memorial, Daddy?"

Lester wanted to say no, but after what he had just discussed, he couldn't. "If your mother agrees to it."

"Thank you, Daddy," Hermione hugged her father. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart," Lester hugged his daughter. "And I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Hermione released him, her thoughts having already turned elsewhere. "I need to pack."

"But your mother hasn't said yes yet," Lester warned.

"She'll say yes," Hermione said confidently, and she flung open her trunk to start to pack.

"I just hope that this isn't a waste of time," Lester didn't want his daughter to go.

Hermione opened up her wardrobe. "I just know it won't be. We're going to find him this time, I'm sure of it."

Lester could see that Hermione was already thinking about Harry, and he headed out of her bedroom to tell Virginia what was happening.

Next Chapter: The children search the bathroom; Nagini proves to be an asset; Ginny gets the shock of her life.

Chapter 35: Second Kiss

29th December 1994

Hermione and George stopped in surprise when they entered the bathroom, George grinning. "Is this a party?"

Susan smiled back. "I thought you two would never get here."

"Does Lucy know that you are here?" George asked as Hermione locked the door behind them, something both Susan and Luna had forgotten to do.

Susan shook her head. "Of course not. She's a stickler for the rules, and she knows that we only had permission for yesterday. So if we don't find the Chamber before she gets up and finds out what we're doing, then we won't get another chance until Easter."

"So any luck so far?" Hermione shivered in the darkened room which was extremely chilly.

Susan's face fell. "No, but we can't give up."

"And we won't," Luna assured her friend. "So if you two would take that side of the room," Luna nodded towards the sinks. "We'll take this side."

Hermione made her wand light up the side of the room she was to search, and she began to look. "Even after our previous searches, I still have no idea what we're looking for."

"Neither do I but I can't bear the thought that Harry's going to be sealed in yet again if we can't find anything," Susan said softly, "even if he is gone."

Luna slipped her hand into Susan's, and squeezed it briefly before letting go. "I don't believe he is, and we'll find him. We have to."

All of the children fell silent when a rattling began at the door a few moments after Luna had finished speaking.

George held a finger to his lips until the noise died away. "Who do you suppose it was?"

"It can't have been Lucy," Hermione whispered. "She'd have overridden my spell. It was probably that Auror they left in the school, checking that the door was locked."

"What about if it was Ron?" Luna asked.

"We can't take the chance of checking, and being discovered," Susan felt bad that it might have been the Gryffindor who too had been helping in their search, but if they checked, and it turned out to be an Auror and not Ron, then their chance would be over. "So let's get on with it, before whoever that was tries again."

After their scare, the children returned to their search until they had covered what felt like every last inch of the bathroom, and the sun was just starting to creep in through the window. Susan returned to her starting point, determined not to give up. "I'm going to begin again."

Hermione coughed from the dust that somehow had managed to pervade the damp bathroom. "I'm thirsty."

"Get a drink then," George nodded towards the sinks.

Hermione headed over to the sinks and turned on a tap. As she bent her head and took a mouthful of cold water, a beam of winter sunlight lit up the tap next to her, and Hermione almost choked in her excitement. "Everyone, look at this tap."

The children hurried over to Hermione, George running his finger over the tap. "A snake? Why would anyone etch a snake onto the tap?"

"It has to be what we've been looking for," Luna's eyes were shining brightly. "I'm sure of it."

"The teams must have seen it," Susan said sensibly, knowing how thoroughly the Aurors would have checked the bathroom.

"I don't think so; no-one's mentioned it," Hermione countered as she tried the tap. "It doesn't work."

"It's probably rusted up," George tried as well but the tap didn't budge. "Try a spell."

All the children tried spell upon spell but nothing moved the tap. Hermione stopped them after they had wasted ten minutes trying. "Stop! Perhaps the tap is not meant to move; perhaps it's just an indicator that the Chamber is here, which means that there has to be another way into it."

"Such as?" Susan was quickly growing despondent as the bathroom began to get lighter, and their window of opportunity began to get smaller.

"I don't know," Hermione shrugged before making a suggestion. "A magical password or something."

"Abracadabra," Susan said loudly.

"That's a Muggle word, Susan," Hermione said in exasperation.

"It might have worked," Susan defended her choice. "You come up with something."

"Slytherin," Hermione tried. When that failed she tried several other words that she thought might open the Chamber, but she soon ran dry of ideas.

Luna then took over from her but like Hermione, she also failed. "Something has to work."

George pulled out a blank piece of parchment. "This might work."

"A piece of parchment?" Susan asked in a puzzled voice.

"Not just any piece of parchment," George tapped the parchment and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

The three girls gasped as lines, words, and images began to appear on the parchment until soon it was full. Hermione took it from George. "This is Hogwarts. George, where did you get this?"

"I nicked it from Filch during my first year. It took me and Fred a while to figure it out though," George grinned.

"So what exactly is it?" Susan leant over trying to get a better look at the parchment.

"This ladies, is the Marauders' Map," George announced in a grand voice. "But it's more than just a map. It tells me where everyone is at any given time, and a few other little secrets as well."

"How is that going to help us?" Luna looked down at the Map. "Ooh look, there's Ron."

"At breakfast!" Hermione wasn't surprised that the ever-hungry Gryffindor was filling his belly. "But isn't it rather early for him to be up?"

"I think he might have been our mystery caller," George suggested.

"Why didn't you show us the Map then?" Susan asked, a little peeved at George.

"It wasn't something I was willing to share unless I had to," George responded honestly. "Now let's forget about Ron, and find the bathroom on this." He looked over the Map, and pursed his lips. "Drat, no password."

"Why would there be a password there?" Hermione asked, more than a little intrigued by the Map.

"Look at the Hump-Backed Witch," George told her. "See that bubble with the word 'Dissendium' in it?"

Everyone looked, and Luna made the connection. "It's the password to get into that passageway behind her, isn't it?"

"Yeah," George confirmed Luna's guess. "I was hoping that there might be a similar one for the Chamber, but that looks like a bust." He took out his wand, and again tapped the parchment. "Mischief Managed."

The Map went blank, and Hermione turned on her boyfriend. "You really should hand that in."

"It's too useful," George had no intention of doing so, and he slipped it into his back pocket. "And you can tell me as much as you want to that it isn't right, but I don't care. The Map is mine now."

Hermione knew that when he was like this, no matter what she did, George wouldn't change his mind. "Fine, but it's still wrong."

Susan was more concerned about their failure, than the rights and wrongs of owning the Map. "Now the Map's proved useless, what are we going to do now?"

The children were silent for a few minutes, until Luna's face lit up again. "I have an idea of something that might work but I have to go fetch something first. George, I need you to come with me." Luna then turned and headed towards the door. "We'll be back in a while."

"I guess I'm going with Luna," George waited for Luna to unlock the door, before following her out.

Once they'd left, Hermione relocked the door. "We need to keep trying."

Susan was tired and sank down onto the floor where it wasn't damp. "I've been at this for hours, and I need a break. But I'll start looking again in a minute. It's the least I can do."

Hermione sat down and leant against Susan, grateful for her body heat. "You still feel bad about not standing by Harry when he found out that he was a Parselmouth, don't you?"

"I always will," Susan said a little sadly. "I always hoped that there might be a chance for us to become really good friends again, and when I was told Harry was dead, it was probably the worst day of my life. So I vowed then that I would never give up looking for him, even if he was dead. I let him down once, and I'll never do it again."

"None of us will give up," Hermione promised.

"I know you won't," Susan smiled a little nervously. "But I'm afraid of what we will find if we manage to get into the Chamber."

"That's not my biggest fear," Hermione said softly. "We have to believe that Luna is right and that somehow Harry is still alive. And

given that, my fear is that we're going to fail, and never find the entrance."

"In that case we can't give up," Susan got to her feet and held out her hand to Hermione who took it. "Let's try and get into the Chamber again while we wait for George and Luna to come back."

Almost twenty minutes had gone by the time the pair finally returned, and a stressed Susan pounced on them immediately. "What took you, and why have you got Nagini with you?"

Luna tried to explain what they'd been doing. "It's a long way to Hagrid's hut, and..."

George interrupted. "We'd have been even longer if Luna had gotten her way about going to find Ron."

"I thought it was only fair," Luna protested.

"Just get on with it," Susan snapped.

George could see the girl was stressed, so he got back on track. "As we've just said, it's a good way to Hagrid's hut but when we got there, he wanted to talk about Harry. I thought he'd never stop but eventually he let us take Nagini."

"What did you tell him you wanted her for?" Susan kept her distance from the snake even though it was caged.

"I said it would help me deal with Harry's loss," Luna responded, and she watched a frown cross Hermione's face. "I wasn't lying."

"You weren't exactly being truthful either," Hermione also kept her distance from the snake. "So why have you got her?"

"Because Luna thought that maybe a snake could open the entrance," George filled the two girls in on what Luna had told him on the way to Hagrid's hut.

Susan's face lit up. "It might work – there is a snake on the tap."

Hermione too was smiling. "And the Chamber was supposed to be have been built by Slytherin, a well-known Parselmouth. Put Nagini in front of it."

George awkwardly hefted the cage up. Even with a featherlight charm, it was still awkward to balance the cage on the sinks. "Find Harry, Nagini."

Nagini didn't understand human speech but she did recognize the words "Harry" and "Nagini". She had missed Harry. He hadn't been to see her as he'd promised, and she didn't understand why the two-legged one, who she knew was Harry's friend, and who she quite liked as he had often brought her mice, had brought her into this cold, damp room. She liked it much better in Hagrid's hut.

George frowned when the snake did nothing. "Come on, Nagini."

Nagini watched George point at the tap again. She could see an etching of a snake but didn't understand what it was there for. When George continued to point at the tap, Nagini decided that he wanted her to talk to the snake etched on the tap, and so she hissed, "Hello."

The etching didn't respond, and Nagini turned to stare at George, still not understanding what he wanted.

Susan gave a yell of rage. "Come on, you stupid snake!"

"Susan, she can't understand you," George reminded her, and he went back to pointing at the tap and saying Harry's name.

Hermione had had enough after a few minutes. "It's not working, George. I have another idea. Turn her to face the toilets."

George did as he was told, not entirely sure what Hermione intended to do, and he watched as Hermione hissed at one of the doors as she opened it, and then closed it. "She's never going to understand that."

"Well, your idea wasn't working," Susan barked out, fear putting her on edge.

George placed a hand on Susan's arm. "Sorry. Just keep trying, Hermione."

"I intend to," Hermione smiled quickly at Susan before she continued to repeat her actions, hoping that the snake might catch on.

Nagini didn't understand Hermione's hissing as it was completely garbled but she did understand that the girl was making the strange hissing noise every time she opened the door, and then closed it. She decided that Hermione needed to know what the words "open" and "close" were. She therefore hissed "open" at Hermione when Hermione opened the door. Nagini didn't get the chance to hiss "close" as the sink she was balanced on suddenly began to move.

Susan gave a scream of delight, and threw herself on George. "She did it, George. She did it."

"Tell me something I don't know," George muttered under his breath as he hugged the delighted girl back.

"Nagini!" Luna called out in warning.

George quickly let go of Susan and managed to rescue the snake from off the sink before she disappeared into the hole that had just begun to open. "Thanks."

When the movement ended, Luna lit up her wand and held it out over the dark chasm below. "What do you suppose is down there?"

"I don't know," George stepped back from the hole, and placed Nagini's cage onto the ground. "But I think we should get Lucy."

Lucy had just finished dressing when an urgent knocking at her door told her that someone was trying to gain access. She wasn't entirely surprised to find four of the five children staying at Hogwarts outside. "Good morning."

"We found it, Lucy," Hermione blurted out. "We found the entrance."

Lucy disregarded the fact that the children had given Albus their word not to enter the bathroom alone; that could wait until later. "Show me." She soon found herself peering down a large black hole. "How did you find it?"

Hermione recanted what had happened. "What are you going to do?"

"Take a look," Lucy replied bravely.

"But you might get hurt," Susan said in a worried voice.

"I'll be very careful," Lucy promised. "Now go stand by the door, and if I'm not out within a few minutes, or if you hear anything untoward, then run and lock the door behind you." She then cast cushioning charms into the chasm before turning her wand on herself and casting a floating spell. Then she smiled at the children and disappeared into the hole.

Less than two minutes later Lucy reappeared to find Hermione impatiently hopping from one foot to another. "You can relax now."

"Did you find Harry?" Hermione asked, still nervously jiggling.

"I'm afraid not but I did find Lockhart," Lucy shuddered. "And he's dead."

"Did the creature rip out his heart?" Susan asked fearfully.

Lucy shook her head. "His lower half is buried beneath a rock fall. What's left of his upper body has started to decay."

"Do you think Harry might be somewhere behind the rock fall?" Luna glanced towards the opening.

"I don't know, but I'm going to ask some of Amelia's men to come as well as alerting the Headmaster," Lucy ushered the children out, and locked the door behind her.

It was a long morning for the four children, and for Ron, who had joined them, and confirmed that he had been the one who had tried the door that morning. When Lucy finally returned, she was accompanied by Minerva and Albus, and she beckoned to the children. "You can come with us."

The children nervously followed the silent teachers back to the bathroom and down into the Chamber, each being floated down one

by one. At the base of the hole, a massive pile of rocks lay to one side, and gigantic pieces of wood were shoring up the ceiling. Albus pointed at them. "Keep your voices low. A spell has been put in place to bolster the wood supports but I'd still not rather take the chance of bringing down the ceiling again."

The children were led along a dank passageway and through a circular door. All of them gaped at the massive statue at the far end of the Chamber.

"That's Salazar Slytherin!" Hermione said excitedly.

"But he's not who you're here for," Albus smiled brightly, giving all the children hope. "This way."

They were led up the middle of the Chamber, and then Albus diverted to the left into a well-lit side passage. "I believe this young man is who you've been looking for."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, and she shot forward.

"Is he really alright?" Susan asked, her voice shaking.

Lucy patted a trembling Susan's shoulder. "We believe he's going to be fine, Susan."

"But he's got a tooth buried in his arm," Hermione pointed out as she stepped even closer, George right behind her.

"It's from the basilisk that he fought," Albus could see the children were astonished at his announcement, and he went on to explain. "When we found Harry, his arm was buried deep in a Basilisk's mouth, and most of the Basilisk's head had been destroyed, killing it, but obviously not before it sank its fang into Harry's arm. We've removed the Basilisk, but we thought you might like to be here when he was revived."

"Why didn't it kill him?" Having read up on what she believed was in the Chamber, Luna knew only too well how a Basilisk killed.

"We believe Harry only saw its reflection," Lucy pointed at the puddles of water that covered the floor. "And that he reached around to try and destroy it, hence his partially kneeling and looking down."

"Will he really be alright?" Susan asked, her voice still shaking as she wiped away some tears that had made their way to the surface.

"Let's see, shall we," Albus pulled two vials from his pocket. "First we need to wake him."

Hermione stopped Albus. "But won't the poison from the fang kill him if we wake him, if it hasn't already?"

Before Albus could respond, Luna jumped in to ask an important question. "Is he wearing his cufflinks?"

Hermione looked at Harry's upturned wrist. "Yes, he's wearing them."

"Are they magical cufflinks?" Ron asked, completely oblivious to the cufflinks' existence.

"They were a gift," Luna didn't want to go into more detail without Harry's permission.

Minerva relieved Luna of her burden. "I do believe Harry wouldn't mind Mr. Weasley being let into the secret. Harry received them as a gift of justice from a former housemate, and they can protect Harry against some poisons and spell."

Albus also glanced at Harry's wrist. "But as you can see, even though he was wearing them, they were unable to protect him from the Basilisk, and I doubt they would have saved him from the poison either. It takes something far more powerful."

"Phoenix tears, Sir?" Hermione asked.

Albus held up the shiny, transparent liquid. "Phoenix tears, Miss Granger."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Will they take long to work?"

"No," Albus moved into position. "If some of you wouldn't mind helping?"

A still tearful Susan immediately moved to kneel behind Harry, as Lucy and Hermione both knelt down at Harry's side. George and Ron stood back and let them get on with things, content to simply watch with Minerva and Luna. Everyone was on edge as Albus stood over Harry and dripped several drops of the Mandrake potion onto Harry's lips.

Luna looked over at the Headmaster. "What is going to happen?"

"I will be administering this potion a few drops at a time," Albus let a few more drops fall out onto Harry's tongue now that his mouth had opened. "Susan, when Harry becomes limp, if you could support his upper body and head. Lucy, when the unfreezing process reaches his arm if you would pull out the tooth. And Hermione, as soon as Lucy removes the tooth, please immediately empty the vial of tears onto Harry's wound."

Luna watched with fascination as Harry's upper body began to slowly resume its usual flexibility. "It's almost like watching a rock melting."

"An interesting analogy, Miss Lovegood," Minerva said a little acerbically, worry and anticipation making her tone sharper than usual.

Luna could see that the teacher was upset, and she decided to take a small liberty by gently squeezing Minerva's arm in comfort. "He is going to be alright, Professor."

Minerva smiled back, and then turned her attention back to Harry, where Lucy was about to pull the tooth out. Everyone winced when Harry cried out, and Susan wrapped her arms even tighter around him to make sure that he wouldn't fall, cradling his upper body against her chest. But even with the obvious pain of taking out the tooth, Harry still didn't open his eyes.

As instructed, Hermione poured the phoenix tears over the wound, her fear obvious in her voice. "Harry, wake up." When he didn't answer, she tried again. "Harry, you're safe now. Wake up."

Still not fully conscious, Harry groaned. "Ginny?"

"Harry, it's me, Hermione," Hermione didn't care that Albus hadn't fully restored Harry or that she was being watched. Instead she threw herself on her friend, wrapping her arms around his chest and Susan's arms, almost knocking them both to the floor.

Lucy inhaled sharply when without warning Harry lifted up his newly mended arm to tangle in Hermione's hair, and then brought Hermione's mouth into contact with his.

Shocked, Hermione gasped, allowing Harry access to the inner reaches of her mouth, and she went rigid when Harry's tongue slipped inside. For one brief moment she couldn't help but let Harry kiss her, savoring the feeling, before meeting George's shocked gaze and pulling free.

At the jerking sensation, Harry slowly came to. He could remember the most pleasant feeling of what he thought had been kissing someone, but he wasn't entirely sure whether it had been a dream or not. As he came to, he found that his lips were tingling, and he slowly opened his eyes to find Lucy looking down at him. "Did I just kiss someone?"

Lucy, who was kneeling directly over him, answered his question. "I'm afraid so."

"Oh God, I didn't, did I?" Harry immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Susan slowly shook her head. "It wasn't Lucy you kissed, Harry." She turned her head to where Hermione had gotten to her feet and had taken a step backwards.

Harry groaned with embarrassment when he realized who it was he had kissed, and without thinking blurted out, "I'm so sorry, Hermione. I messed up again, didn't I?" Hermione didn't get a chance to answer as a strangled gurgle brought a previously unnoticed George to Harry's attention. "George, I..."

George turned and strode off. Hermione turned to the others. "I have to go after him."

As Hermione left the cave, Harry leant back against his friend. "You'd better help me up. My leg is hurt, and I need to talk to George."

Minerva knelt down, tears in her eyes. "You're still partially petrified. And right now you shouldn't be worrying about others. You silly boy."

Realizing that Minerva needed him more than George, Harry held out his arms to be hugged. "I'm sorry if I upset you, Aunt Minnie, but at least you found me."

A softly weeping Minerva hugged Harry back. "I'm just glad that you're alright now."

"Let's get you fully mobile," Albus interrupted, aware that Harry would have problems if he didn't get his circulation working properly as soon as possible.

Outside the cavern, having dashed after her boyfriend, Hermione found George near the rock fall. "George, Harry didn't mean to kiss me."

"It didn't look like that to me," George snapped. "And what did he mean by he's messed up again?"

Hermione had hoped this would never come out but she now had little choice except to tell the truth. "Harry's kissed me once before but it was before we dated, and Harry and I both agreed it was a mistake."

"A mistake he's just repeated," George glared at the opening to the cavern he'd just left.

"George, he thought I was Ginny," Hermione put a tentative hand on George's arm. "You heard him call out her name."

"But he kissed you after you said it was you," George said, his voice still angry.

"I don't think he knew what he was doing," Hermione tried to get George to calm down. "He's been petrified, and I know only too well that it's pretty disorientating when you come around. When it

happened to me, I didn't know where I was when I came to, and I hadn't been poisoned like Harry."

George was aware that Hermione believed in telling the truth, and he met her eyes, his utmost fear coming out. "So you didn't want to find Harry because you fancied him or something?"

Hermione had never seen George this uncertain of himself, and she sought to allay his fears. "George, I'm going out with you. If I had wanted to go out with Harry, I would have done so when he first kissed me, when I was single."

George let out a long breath. "Sorry, but when I saw him kiss you, and after what he said, I just thought... Well, you know what I thought."

"I would never hurt you like that," Hermione leant forward and shared a kiss with George, pushing down the little voice that said "it's not as good as with Harry".

Just as they broke apart, Harry and the others caught up with them. Harry immediately apologized. "Hermione, George, I'm sorry about what happened back there."

George thought that Harry looked genuinely apologetic, but he still had to know for certain. "You really had no idea what you were doing?"

"Not at all. I would never do that to you or Hermione," Harry assured George. "I'm so sorry."

George held out his hand. "Apology accepted but don't ever let me catch you kissing my girlfriend again."

"I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of Ginny's bat bogey hex if I did," Harry joked, before becoming serious again. "I really am sorry."

"Let's just forget about it," George was now beginning to feel a little silly, and realized that he had overreacted.

"Thanks," Harry leant against Ron, and turned to the Headmaster, who had been thoroughly amused by what was happening. "How do we get out of here, Sir?"

"I will float you up when we reach the exit," Albus offered.

As they passed the other side rock pile, Harry glanced at it. "What happened to Lockhart? I lost sight of him when the roof came down."

"I'm afraid he died," Lucy said gravely.

"Serves him right," Harry had no sympathy for the teacher who had tried to kill him.

"Let's continue," Albus said and began to lead the way back to the exit.

Soon the children found themselves at the hole where Albus had helped them down, and he was about to float them up when Harry stopped him. "Actually I have a vague memory of how I got down here. Let me just try something." Harry then hissed "stairs" and a set of stairs appeared.

Once they were at the top, Albus touched Harry's arm. "Take a deep breath."

Harry and Ron found themselves in the Headmaster's office, Harry swallowing hard. "That was unpleasant."

"Apparating takes some get used to," Albus smiled. "And I didn't think you were up to walking."

"But you can't apparate in Hogwarts," Harry protested just as Hermione had, even though Ron had told him during first year that the Headmaster had done exactly that.

"I can," Albus smiled and pointed to a door. "Harry, the bathroom is through there if you would like to clean yourself up a little."

Harry thought the door seemed a long way away. "I might need some help."

"Mr. Weasley can help you to the bathroom, and then we'll get you to Madam Pomfrey. I didn't try to heal you myself just in case there were any adverse side-effects from the basilisk poison," Albus informed him.

Both Ron and George ended up accompanying Harry, the rest of the rescue group having quickly rejoined them. When they returned, a man Harry didn't recognize was talking to Lucy, but broke off when the three boys re-entered the room. "I'm Remus Lupin."

"Harry Potter," Harry informed him, as Ron and George lowered Harry onto a chair. Harry shook hands from the chair, feeling how much the man's hand was shaking. "Pleased to meet you."

"Harry, Professor Lupin is the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Albus explained.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Remus' voice was shaking. "You have no idea how wonderful it to see you."

Harry had to refrain from rolling his eyes. Lockhart had gone but it looked as though he had another idiot for a defense teacher who was obviously star-struck by who he was. "I guess." Harry responded before he looked up at the Headmaster. "Can we fix my leg now?"

"I'll take you to Madam Pomfrey," Remus scooped Harry up as if he was as light as a feather.

Harry felt rather uncomfortable being carried by someone he didn't know but he guessed that the Headmaster had no problem with it, so he said nothing.

Once inside the infirmary, having already been warned by Amelia, Poppy waddled over, tears in her eyes. "Harry, welcome back."

Harry was shocked to find himself being hugged but didn't mind the nurse's affection. "I'm glad to be back."

Poppy straightened up, and at once became businesslike. "Let's get you sorted out."

Before she could check Harry over, a crash from the door made everyone turn to look. Harry's face immediately lit up. "Ginny!"

Instead of entering the room, Ginny turned and fled.

Severus turned at the sound of the door to the potions room slamming open. "A little decorum would be a nice thing."

"He's alive," Ginny spluttered. "He's alive."

"Who's alive?" Severus asked in a voice that revealed his annoyance at Ginny's blathering. Having been shut up in the potions room for hours, he had no idea of what had been going on in the school.

"Harry is, and now they're going to find out what I've done," Ginny managed to get out before bursting into frightened tears.

"You're telling me that Potter is really alive after all this time?" Severus hid his anger when Ginny nodded, unable to speak for crying. Severus immediately realized that the Lovegood girl's hypothesis about Potter being petrified must have been correct. Then, remembering Ginny's end comment, Severus marched over to her and grabbed her chin. "So what did you do?" When she didn't respond, he shook her. "Tell me what you did."

"Amortentia," Ginny began to cry harder.

Severus now knew why Harry had succumbed to Ginny's advances. "When did you give him the last dose?"

Ginny held up three fingers, and Severus made a guess. "Three days before he vanished?"

Ginny nodded, and Severus shook his head, making his way into his stores cupboard, before coming out with a vial of antidote, which he used for the older students when they were stupid enough to sample Amortentia when making it. "Take this to him, and tell him it's a nutritional potion."

Ginny shook her head. "I can't."

"Did you deliver the potions?" Severus slipped the vial of antidote into his pocket.

"Dropped them," Ginny managed to blub out, before dropping her face into her hands, and crying harder.

"Do not leave this room until I get back," Severus warned before he made up another tray and headed for the infirmary.

After Ginny had left without saying anything to him, Harry turned a distressed face to everyone, and asked, "What did I do wrong?"

George, who had seen the happy and then sad look on Harry's face, held up his hands. "I swear I haven't told her."

"We know that," Hermione nudged George. "You haven't had time."

"I think it's just shock," Albus said gently. "We all thought you were dead."

"Dead?" Harry repeated.

"Harry, the Christmas holidays are almost over," Ron told his friend. "You've been in the Chamber for over six months."

Harry flopped onto his pillows, his face more than a little pale. "Six months?"

"It's actually December 29th," Hermione told him. "Professor Dumbledore had to seal off the bathroom until now."

Harry's paleness became even more pronounced. "I was left there?"

"I'm afraid I was only doing what I thought was best for the school, my boy," Albus placed a hand on Harry's violently shaking shoulder. "Let me get you a calming potion." Albus moved away as the conversation continued.

"So you all really thought I was dead?" Harry's voice was now also shaking noticeably, his brush with an eternity in the Chamber hitting him full force.

"Yes," Ron nodded.

As Ron confirmed that they had truly believed Harry to be gone, Harry realized that maybe Ginny had acted the way she had for another reason. "Is Ginny seeing anyone else?"

George shared a worried look with Hermione before answering. "She's dating Michael Corner."

Harry immediately experienced a wave of depression, and was hard put not to cry. "But she said she loved me. How could she go out with him?"

Susan's previous theory about a love potion, which her aunt had shot down, came barreling back into her mind, but she still sought to try and console Harry. "Harry, like everyone else, she thought you were dead. And she only started dating Corner a few weeks ago."

"So do you think she'll finish with him now that she knows I'm alive?" Harry asked hopefully.

Hermione hated seeing Harry like this. "I don't know, Harry."

"But I love her," Harry said miserably. "And I'll do anything to get her back."

"Anything?" Susan asked, now more than convinced that she had been right after all about the potion.

"Anything," Harry said forcefully.

"We'll tell her that," Susan promised, and she caught Luna's eye and nodded towards the windows.

Luna left the group and followed her friend, while the conversation continued between Harry and the others. "So how did you know where to look and how did you find me?" Harry still had no idea.

"Colin Creevey and Hannah Abbott both saw Lockhart going into the girls' bathroom before they were petrified," George told him. "It's because of them that the teachers knew exactly where the entrance was, even though until today, no-one could find it."

"I owe them big time then," Harry said in an awed voice.

"Actually you might owe them a life debt," Remus said seriously, as he rejoined them, a calming potion in his hand. "The Headmaster said to give you this."

"A life debt?" Harry questioned the term, but ignored the potion.

"A debt that is owed if one wizard saves another wizard's life," Hermione hurriedly told Harry.

"Five points to Gryffindor," Remus awarded Hermione the points. "Harry, please take this."

Before Harry could take the potion, a sound at the door signaled yet another visitor; this time it was Severus with a fresh tray of potions. Harry was more than a little surprised when he saw pure hatred course across Severus' features when he laid eyes on the Defense teacher. "Lupin."

"Good morning, Severus," Remus responded politely.

Severus ignored the pleasantries, uncaring that the children were listening. "So I see that Miss Weasley was correct about Potter."

"She was," Remus continued to smile at Severus. "What can we do for you, Severus?"

"I came to replace the vials that Miss Weasley dropped," Severus held out a tray. "And to give Potter a nutritional potion, compliments of Miss Weasley."

Harry scowled. "I don't need any potions."

"If you won't take the calming potion, then you should at least take this one," Remus declared, and took the proffered vial, earning another look of hatred from Severus.

Harry had little choice except to drink the potion, which tasted surprisingly good. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Remus took the potion tray from a still scowling Severus, and moved away to speak to Albus, who was still in with Poppy.

Believing that they were alone again, Harry returned to the subject of the Chamber, not noticing that Severus hadn't left the room. "Okay, so how did the teachers discover the actual entrance to the Chamber?"

"They didn't. Hermione did. And Nagini opened it," Hermione told him.

"Nagini?" Harry was shocked. "Did she know how to open the Chamber the whole time?"

"No," George shook his head, and began to tell Harry what they had done.

When he had finished, Harry was in tears. "You all thought I was dead but still didn't give up."

"We all care about you, Harry," Hermione smiled at Harry. "And we could hardly leave you down there."

Susan rejoined in the conversation, her talk with Luna now over. "I let you down once, but couldn't do it again."

"I always knew you were still alive," Luna moved to stand by Susan.

"I got locked out," Ron pouted.

"And I was along for the party," George joked, before he explained about Harry's missing friends. "Neville had to attend your memorial, and Justin and Hannah are both on holiday but I do know that if they had been able to, they would have been here too."

His friends' words made Harry's tears trickle over and down his cheeks. "You had a memorial for me?"

Hermione handed Harry a handkerchief. "The whole wizarding world did, Harry."

Harry let out a small sob at the news. "Sorry, it's been a bit much."

Poppy agreed with Harry's estimation. "I think we should leave Mr. Potter to get some rest. You can all come back and see him tomorrow."

"But we don't know what happened to Harry," George protested.

"He's not up to telling you that just yet," Poppy declared firmly. "He can tell you after I've released him, and that won't be until I believe he's fully recovered from his ordeal."

Harry found himself being dosed up with a sedative, and within moments he was sleeping. Poppy turned to those standing around his bedside. "Now, everyone out."

As the group shuffled out, Poppy went to speak to Severus, who she had seen at the back of the room listening to what had happened, but he was nowhere to be seen. "It will have to wait then."

After leaving the infirmary, Severus made his way back to the potions lab where he filled Ginny in on what had happened. "Lupin fed Potter the antidote, and Madam Pomfrey has dosed him up so that he sleeps."

Ginny's face reflected her worry. "How long before the antidote takes effect?"

"He'll be back to normal by morning which is probably when he'll wake up," Severus scowled at Ginny. "I can't believe you were so stupid as to use something as obvious as Amortentia on Potter."

"I just wanted him to like me," Ginny said in a pitiful voice.

"Just don't ever do it again. Next time you might not be so lucky, and you might end up in front of the Wizengamot," Severus warned. "Now clean up and then get out of my sight."

Ginny miserably began to put her stuff away. She was about to leave when Severus stopped her. "And if you ever steal a potion from me again, whether you made it or not, then I will see you not only ejected from the scholarship but from this school. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir," Ginny managed to get before bursting into tears and fleeing.

Severus turned away in disgust. "Idiot girl." He then headed out of the classroom, and down to the main gate. He had to tell Tom what had happened.

Next Chapter: Susan and Luna talk to Harry about Ginny; Sirius has a very bad day.

Chapter 36: Amortentia

29th December 1994

Spinner's End

Tom listened to what Severus had to say, and swore under his breath. "How does he do it?"

"I have no idea," Severus was no less thrilled about Harry's resurrection. "What do you intend to do about the attacks you had planned for Easter?"

"I'll move them forward," Tom told him. "With Potter's return from the dead, it makes sense that Black would try to bring him, and the friends that helped him, down."

"So when will they happen?" Severus asked.

"Now," Tom decided. "Let's go get us a scapegoat."

Malfoy Manor

Sirius got up from the bed as two masked men entered his surprisingly opulent, but inescapable, guestroom. "I don't know who you are, or what you want with me, but I won't join you or your Master, no matter what you do to me."

"I don't want you to join anyone," Tom smirked behind his mask. "I just want you to kill a few Muggles."

"I won't do it," Sirius refused.

"Crucio," Tom screamed out as he aimed his wand at Sirius.

As the spell was dropped, Sirius shook himself, and lifted his head. "I'm still not doing it."

"Let's try another way," Tom took aim again. "Imperio."

Almost immediately Sirius began to fight Tom's voice telling him what he was going to do, and within a few moments, he'd shaken free of the spell. "That isn't going to work."

"Imperio!" Tom put more power behind the spell this time, but again Sirius managed to fight it off.

"Like I said, it isn't going to work," Sirius said smugly.

"Fracto Talus," Tom snapped.

Sirius screamed as his right ankle snapped, but he still didn't give in. "You can do what you want to me but I still won't help you."

"Let's leave you in pain for a few days," Tom said. "See how you feel about helping me then."

"He's to receive no meals for a few days," Tom ordered after he'd left the room and ripped off his mask. "He has a bathroom if he wants water; if he can get there of course."

"I don't think he'll change his mind," Severus removed his mask as he passed on his opinion. "No matter how many bones you break or meals you deprive him of."

"Neither do I, but it will teach him to cross me," Tom answered in a tight voice. "Since the Imperius curse doesn't work on Black, I want you to make me the Imperius potion."

"It will take some time, three to four weeks depending on the potency of the ingredients," Severus responded. Unlike the Imperius curse, which was fairly easy to master, the Imperius potion was an illegal potion that was difficult to brew, but Severus had made it several times, and was more than confident in his own abilities. "And I'll need some of your blood as well as Black's to make it."

Tom held out his hand. "Do you have a vial?"

"Of course," Severus withdrew one from his cloak, and painlessly spelled the blood he needed from Tom. "Do you want me to go and get some of Black's blood now?"

"Yes, but knock him out first," Tom wasn't going to give warning to Sirius of what he was planning. The difficult to make potion strangely worked best if taken with food, and he didn't want Sirius starving himself to stop the potion being administered. "Once the potion is ready, I want it inserted in his food over the space of three days, and then you can contact me to let me know it's been done." Tom slipped his mask back on. "And don't mess up Black too much when you're collecting his blood."

Severus recognized a dismissal when he heard one, and he therefore re-entered Sirius' room. When he finally left it, Sirius had a broken rib and a missing tooth in addition to his broken ankle. Deciding that he had better let Lucius know what was happening, Severus headed in search of the owner of Malfoy Manor.

30th December 1994

Hogwarts

Harry awoke to find an indistinct redhead sitting at his bedside. Harry therefore felt for his rarely worn glasses that he could just about see on the bedside, and slid them on. Now the redhead came into focus. "Ginny, what are you doing here?"

"I felt bad about yesterday, and I wanted to make sure you were okay," Ginny said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than yesterday," Harry responded, before spotting some long-armed gloves and numerous gifts on a table at the side of the bed. "What's all that?"

"Some fudge from Mum, a Muggle board game from Dad, the gloves are from Charlie – he said that you should try wearing them the next time you take on a Basilisk - and the nutritional potions are from me," Ginny outlined the various gifts.

"They were here?" Harry asked.

"For most of the night and although Charlie really wanted to stay, Madam Pomfrey kicked him out so that she could start to get the ward ready for the students' arrival in a few days. She said that unless he's a student then he was out, especially as you were going

to be okay. Charlie will be stopping by again tomorrow night..." Ginny wasn't surprised her brother hadn't taken no for answer, "...if Madam Pomfrey lets him in, of course. She actually only let me back in about an hour ago."

When a slightly uncomfortable silence fell between them, Harry decided that he ought to bring up their relationship. "Ginny, about yesterday, I..."

"Harry, I'm sorry I acted as I did but I thought you were dead," Ginny confirmed what Ron had said. "Seeing you in here was a bit of shock."

"What were you doing in school, if you weren't looking for me?" Harry asked.

"Mum and Dad went to Romania to see Charlie, so we, that's Ron, George, and me, stayed here - Fred went to stay with Angelina. Mum and Dad were returning for your memorial and we were all supposed to go with them," Ginny explained. "But then I discovered that the others were going to look for you instead, and so I decided to stay but I couldn't face looking for you, just in case we found something horrible. So I decided that I might as well make a start on a potion I wanted to brew, and Se... Professor Snape was here, so it was something to distract me. I had no idea that they had gone looking for you again yesterday morning."

"So finding me alive and well shook you up, didn't it?" Harry could still remember the shocked look on Ginny's face.

"It did, and, again, I'm sorry I reacted like that," Ginny took Harry's hand. "Harry, I'm also sorry that you found out about Michael from George. He told me he'd told you."

"Ginny, it's alright," Harry assured her. "I think we're better off as friends anyway."

Ginny's heart plummeted; even though she was dating Michael, she had still half-hoped that even with the Amortentia out of his system that Harry still might have feelings for her. "You're probably right." Not wanting to do anything that might seem suspicious, she slapped on a bright smile. "And I expect you're hungry. I know I am, so I'd better go and get some breakfast."

"I'll see you later then," Harry was a little taken aback at Ginny's abrupt exit but he decided that she probably felt uncomfortable about Michael, and was trying to spare his feelings; something he was more than a little surprised to discover didn't really hurt at all.

Later that morning

Having talked briefly about what Susan suspected yet again, Susan and Luna headed up to the infirmary. "Can we speak to Harry, please?"

"He's just finished washing," Poppy nodded in the direction of the curtains that surrounded Harry's bed.

Susan coughed politely. "Can we come in?"

Harry sat up. "Yes."

The two girls slipped behind the curtains. "How are you?"

"Shocked," Harry gave the girls a slight smile. "I've missed so much."

"You'll catch up in no time," Luna assured him, and she sat down.

A nervous Susan didn't, and she remained standing, a pained expression on her face. "Harry, I know it was some time ago, and I've apologized once. But I want to apologize again for not standing by you over the Parseltongue thing."

"Susan, I talked about this with Hannah, and she told me time and time again that you felt terrible. So don't beat yourself up over this. As far as I'm concerned we're friends," Harry patted the chair at the side of his bed. "So sit down."

Susan did as she was told, and used Harry's mention of Hannah to bring up a different subject. "Harry, I'm not prying but you liked Hannah, didn't you?"

"Yes," Harry blushed as he admitted to the feelings he'd had. "I was going to ask her out until she was petrified."

"Do you still like her?" Susan asked a little nervously.

"I don't think so," Harry hadn't really thought about it. "Why?"

"Because she's, erm, dating Justin," Susan said hesitantly.

"I didn't realize," Harry remembered what George had said the previous day. "So the holiday George mentioned was only one holiday and not separate holidays?"

"Yes, they went together with Hannah's parents," Luna told him, "to some Muggle fairyland in America."

Harry knew that Justin had been having second thoughts about Luna, but he had truly believed that the couple would work it out. "I'm sorry, Luna."

"It's okay, Harry," Luna shrugged. "We just weren't meant to be together, and Hannah and Justin were."

Susan went further, going on to defend Justin's new relationship. "It all happened after Hannah was revived, and she came back to school. Justin turned to her to get over what had happened to you, and they began to spend more and more time together until Justin finally asked her out."

"With a little help from me," Luna added. "But I didn't take your feelings about Hannah into consideration, Harry."

Harry could see that Luna was more than a little concerned about his feelings, and he was confused by this. "Why would you? You didn't know about them, and everyone thought I was dating Ginny and that I was dead."

"I didn't think that," Luna reiterated the belief she'd stuck to throughout Harry's disappearance. "I knew you were meant to eventually end up with Hermione, even if you were going to date other girls first, so you couldn't be dead."

Harry shook his head, before gently setting out the current situation. "Luna, Hermione is happy with George. And I'm happy being single."

"Single?" Susan asked, before going on quite bluntly. "I thought you were going to go after Ginny again. You almost had a meltdown yesterday when you found out about Corner."

"I don't know why I reacted like I did," Harry felt more than a little embarrassed about his outburst the previous day. "I mean I like Ginny, but I know that I'm not in love with her."

Susan and Luna looked at each other in surprise, and Susan tried to clarify how Harry felt. "So do you like her as friend or a girlfriend?"

"A friend," Harry smiled a little self-deprecatingly as he again thought about the previous day.

Susan hadn't expected to hear that Harry had suddenly fallen out of love with Ginny overnight, and she suspected that she was missing something. "Don't you think that's rather odd? One minute you're in love with her, and then the next, you're not."

"I suppose," Harry agreed, before he caught a strange look passing between Susan and Luna. "What's going on?"

Luna took Susan's hand in support. "I think you had better tell him."

Susan took a deep breath before saying, "I believe that Ginny Weasley used a love potion on you to make you go out with her."

"A love potion?" Harry laughed. "Ginny would never use a love potion on me."

"Do you know how a love potion works, Harry?" Susan asked in her best teacher's voice.

"No," Harry had to admit.

"It makes the person who receives it become infatuated with the deliverer of the potion," Susan explained. "You can't think about anyone else apart from that person, you want to spend all your time with them, you believe that you love them, and some people have even gone as far as to kill for them."

"But how could Ginny have given me a potion?" Harry asked, now a little unnerved that Susan had pretty much described his feelings for Ginny, except for the part about killing. "I'd have noticed."

"Some potions are undetectable, but others, like Amortentia, use smells to lure you in," Susan said to Harry.

"What do you mean?" Harry wanted to make sure he understood Susan correctly.

"If you were to give me Amortentia, I would probably smell Daddy's cologne, cheese, frog spawn, and chocolate," Luna told Harry what her rather bizarre favorite smells were.

The mention of chocolate rang warning bells for Harry, and he hesitated, prompting Susan to suspect that they were indeed on the right track. "What is it?"

"I don't want you to jump to the wrong conclusion," Harry said, not wanting to condemn Ginny without any solid proof. "But the night before I asked Ginny out, she gave me some chocolates. They smelt amazing, almost like the ocean, the smell of Mrs. Weasley's cookies, and white roses, all rolled up into one – they're all of my favorite smells. And the chocolates tasted better than any chocolates I've ever eaten."

After listening to Harry, Luna decided that Susan had been right. "I think they may have been laced with Amortentia, which is a very potent and illegal love potion."

Harry disagreed. "I don't see how Ginny could have used anything like that on me."

"Why not?" Susan asked in the face of Harry's sure response.

"Because I have cufflinks that are supposed to protect me against that sort of thing," Harry reminded the girls.

"And were you wearing the cufflinks that night?" Susan checked.

Harry thought back before shaking his head. "No, I'd taken them off to get into my pajamas, but I put them back on in the morning. And

Anna said that cufflinks were sort of like a bezoar, so I would have expected any sort of potion to be removed by them."

"Perhaps they don't work on a love potion," Luna suggested, before she asked a question. "Do you know why you decided you didn't love Ginny anymore?"

"Not really. When I woke up this morning she was here, and I just felt differently about her," Harry said simply.

"One day you love her, and the next you split up with her," Susan murmured as she tried to figure things out. Then it occurred to her what might have happened. "Harry, have you taken anything else off her since waking up?"

"No," Harry immediately shook his head, and then he recalled something he had taken that had been brewed by Ginny. "I almost forgot. Ginny made that nutritional potion for me that I took yesterday, and I took another one this morning."

"And how did they taste?" Susan knew that this answer would be the one she needed to be really sure, having researched Amortentia and like substances to the point of exhaustion.

"The first one tasted amazing," Harry gave a small smile as he recalled the taste. "A little like the chocolates but it had a strawberry base. Today's wasn't anywhere near as nice, and tasted a little of almonds."

"Don't you think that's odd?" Susan asked. "Why would the same kind of potion taste different unless perhaps the first one wasn't a nutritional potion? Perhaps it was an antidote."

Harry recognized the point that Susan was trying to make. "You really think Ginny used a potion on me, don't you, and that she's covering up her tracks now that I've recovered?"

"Yes," Susan nodded. "But before I go running to my Aunt again..."

"Again?" Harry interrupted.

Susan went red. "When I went home at the start of the holidays, I told her what I believed but she said that I was wrong, and it was high unlikely that Ginny would have been able to brew such a potion." Susan's color deepened. "And she also thought that I might have been saying it because I was still a little jealous of Ginny because of you."

"But you aren't, are you?" Harry asked worriedly.

Susan went even redder. "No, I like someone else now."

"Who?" Luna turned to face her friend excitedly.

"I'm not telling, so don't ask," Susan wasn't owning up to her current crush. "At the moment we're discussing Harry and Ginny, and whether she used a potion on him."

"What will happen to her if it turns out she did?" Harry asked.

"I have to be honest, and say that she could get into a lot of trouble, but Aunt Amy always says that every case is different," Susan didn't know exactly what would happen. "But let's forget about Ginny until I've spoken to Aunt Amy again."

"That's a little difficult given what you've just told me," Harry responded, reeling a little at the knowledge that Ginny might have used a love potion on him. "I don't think I'll be able to think about anything else."

"Susan is right, Harry. You need to forget about Ginny for the moment," Luna took Harry's hand, and deliberately changed the subject. "Have you been brought up to date with what's happening in the outside world?"

"Not really," Harry said almost absently, still a little lost in his thoughts about Ginny.

Susan took the reins back from Luna. "The Headmaster is going to make an announcement this morning to those students who returned here from your memorial yesterday, at the same time that Aunt Amy tells the press."

"About me coming back from the dead?" Harry couldn't help but grin when Luna nodded. "I bet Malfoy will be pissed."

"He couldn't stop mentioning your death when it was first announced," Susan scowled. "Little creep."

"It's a shame you can't be a fly on his wall, just to see the smile drop off his face when he reads about it," Harry said, his grin even bigger.

"I wish," Susan grinned back. "So what else do you want to know?"

Harry searched for a subject to talk about that wouldn't involved Ginny. "Who won the quidditch world cup?"

"Ireland did but that Krum bloke took the snitch for Bulgaria," Luna hadn't attended but she knew what had happened.

"Okay," Harry tried to think what else he wanted to ask, but after the news he'd received about Ginny, he could think of little else. "I think that's it for the moment but if I'm sure I'll think of something else."

Luna and Susan weren't surprised by Harry's lack of questions, particularly given the news that they just had handed to him about Ginny, so Susan picked on something simple, and asked when Harry would be getting out. "So did Madam Pomfrey say when you would be released?"

"In a couple of days," Harry told her. "She wants to make sure that I'm fully recovered, and to give me some growth and nutritional potions."

Luna grimaced. "I had them as well. So did Susan and Hermione."

Susan nodded in agreement. "You'll have pins and needles for a few weeks."

"Great," Harry sighed. "Why can't I ever catch a break?"

"Well, at least you didn't have to go and stay with your relatives," Susan pointed out. "That's a bonus. And you'll have Lucy to help catch you up with your schoolwork."

"Lucy, as in your Lucy?" Harry questioned, now successfully diverted from thoughts of Ginny.

"Professor Dumbledore employed her to coach Luna and Hermione, and she's been helping me as well. I had to stay in third year," Susan blushed with embarrassment. "But I'm caught up now, and have started on my fourth year work. But I imagine that I'll be catching up all summer."

"I bet I will as well," Harry said miserably, as he realized that he was behind.

"I doubt it," Luna responded. "Hannah missed a couple of months and she didn't have to study much, and Hermione and I will be rejoining everyone else in our years in about a month or so."

Harry cheered up. "So if I work hard, then perhaps I'll catch up quickly." He frowned. "But what about Lucy's job if I do?"

"She's staying on to at least the end of the year," Susan had been happy to hear it. "She's not only been coaching us, but she's also been helping the Muggleborns in first year adapt to the magical world, and Professor Dumbledore said he might make the position permanent."

"That's brilliant," Harry really liked Lucy.

"I know," Susan then turned to the subject that Madam Pomfrey had stopped George asking about the previous day. "So do you feel up to telling us what happened after you went for your detention with Lockhart?"

"I don't remember much about it," Harry told her. "One minute I was in Lockhart's office, and then the next in the Chamber. We had a bit of a duel, he hit me and I hit the roof, which made it cave in. Then that Basilisk came after me, and I used a Reducto spell trying to hit it, and that was the last thing I remembered until I came to."

Luna smirked at him, the thought of what had happened between Harry and Hermione now brought to the forefront. "Did you really not know it was Hermione when you came to?"

"I thought I'd kissed Lucy," Harry reminded her.

"But was it nice?" Luna pressed.

"I don't remember," Harry said evasively.

"Harrrrry..." Luna drawled his voice. "You can tell us. We won't tell George."

"I don't remember," Harry stuck to his previous statement.

"Don't tell me then," Luna huffed, before a little fairy appeared and a chime sounded. Luna smiled sweetly at it. "Thank you." The fairy vanished, and Luna turned her attention back to Harry. "I'm sorry but we have to go now. I asked Lysilda to warn me when it was eleven."

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, more curious about the girls' destinations than the fairy Luna seemed to have acquired.

Luna got to her feet. "Susan is going home to attend the Ministry Ball with her Aunt, and I promised Daddy that I'd come home for New Year's Eve."

"Everyone is going home actually," Susan also got up. "Including Ginny and her brothers."

Harry's thoughts were now focused once more on Ginny, and he looked up at Susan. "So you'll talk to your Aunt about Ginny?"

Susan nodded. "Hopefully she'll listen to me this time."

"Owl me and tell me what she said," Harry demanded.

"I will," Susan bent down and kissed his cheek. "Welcome back, Harry, and Happy New Year."

Luna did the same, but instead of kissing Harry's cheek, she kissed him firmly on the lips. At Harry's surprised look, she just giggled. "I just wondered what it would be like. Happy New Year, Harry."

"Happy New Year, both," Harry grinned, Luna's antics amusing him. "I'll see you in a few days."

After bidding both girls goodbye, Harry lay back to think through what Susan and Luna had brought up.

Fletchley Manor

Remus made his way up to the front door, and rapped firmly on it. When it opened, he found an elegantly dressed woman standing there, and he began to introduce himself. "Hello, I'm..."

"Cordelia, we have servants for that," Edmund walked into the hallway, catching his wife answering the door to a rather careworn man he didn't recognize.

"I was passing by the door when he knocked so it seemed silly not to answer it," Cordelia responded before turning back to Remus. "How can I help you?"

"I'm Professor Lupin from Hogwarts," Remus identified himself. "I'm here to see Justin, if that's possible."

"Come in. He's just getting changed," Cordelia stepped backwards to let Remus in. "I'm Cordelia Finch-Fletchley, Justin's mother."

"Pleased to meet you," Remus shook hands with her, before he found himself facing Edmund, from whom he could feel waves of disdain emanating.

Nevertheless, Edmund also identified himself and shook hands. "What brings you here? Justin isn't due back in school until the second."

"It's about his friend, Harry," Remus felt another wave of feeling coming from Edmund, this time impatience. "He's been found, and..."

Remus didn't get any further as Justin and Hannah both appeared. It was obvious from their clothing that they were about to go out. Justin's eyes widened at the sight of his professor. "Professor Lupin!"

"Good morning, Justin," Remus responded politely. "Did you have a good flight back yesterday?"

"Yes, thanks," Justin was confused as to why his Defense teacher was there. "I don't mean to be rude but why are you here?"

"It's about Harry," Remus watched Justin pale. "Perhaps you'd better sit down."

"I'm fine, just tell me!" Justin just wanted to know what had happened.

"He's been found," Remus noted Hannah moving closer to Justin, her hand slipping into his. "And he's alive."

Justin's knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground, and uncaring that his father wouldn't approve, he didn't attempt to hold back the tears. "That's wonderful."

"Is he okay?" Hannah's voice was shaking, and she too had tears in her eyes, as she knelt down beside Justin.

"He's fine," Remus smiled reassuringly. "He's been resting, but Madam Pomfrey is releasing him tonight."

"Can I see him?" Justin shakily climbed back to his feet, tugging Hannah back up with him.

"If your parents say yes, you may travel back with me now," Remus offered.

"I want him back tomorrow in time for the party," Edmund thought Hannah was pleasant enough, but in his eyes, she wasn't good enough for Justin, and he had therefore set up several eligible girls to meet Justin, even though Hannah would still be there.

"I can bring him back tomorrow morning," Remus promised. "Hannah, would you like to come along as well?"

"Yes, please," Hannah didn't like Edmund, and even though she thought Cordelia was nice, she wasn't staying in this house without Justin.

"Grab an overnight bag, and meet me back down here," Remus instructed them.

Edmund excused himself, leaving Cordelia alone with Remus. "It's very kind of you to take the time to come out and tell Justin personally."

"Harry wanted Justin to hear it from someone he knew, and not from the newspapers, and I'm fairly au fait with the Muggle world, so I offered," Remus explained why he had made the trip. "Harry wanted to come himself but he'd have been swarmed by reporters, and he's not up to that yet."

Cordelia glanced nervously in the direction Edmund had gone in. "This may sound odd but could you not mention to my husband exactly who Harry is?"

Remus was a little taken aback at Cordelia's request but he nodded. "I doubt it will come up, but I'm happy to not to mention it. May I ask why?"

"This is rather disloyal of me but Edmund likes to bring those into his circle who have connections or possible connections, and Harry would, without doubt, fall into that category," Cordelia could see that Remus was interested in what she was saying. "Would you mind continuing this conversation outside? I can give you a coat if you need it."

Remus demurred. "I'm fine. Perhaps we could talk in the rose garden I saw on my way in."

Cordelia slipped on her own coat and opened the door, closing it behind them before continuing the conversation. "Justin hasn't told Edmund who Harry is because of how Edmund treated a former guest of Justin's, and my husband therefore believes that Harry is just an ordinary Muggleborn who lives with his relatives in Surrey."

"Justin was trying to protect Harry from your husband in some way?" Remus queried.

"Yes. As I said, Edmund is all about status, and he'd have wanted Justin to foster the friendship but for all the wrong reasons," Cordelia led the way through the damp garden. "As it is, Justin views Harry

as the brother he never had, and he therefore wasn't going to ruin their relationship by exposing Harry to Edmund's attentions."

"He really cares that much about Harry?" Remus hadn't realized how close the two boys obviously were.

"Yes," Cordelia smiled. "Hence his reaction to hearing about Harry's recovery. Justin was heartbroken when he thought Harry had died, and he admitted then how he felt. Unfortunately we've been unable to have another child, and Harry has therefore taken the place in Justin's affections that a sibling would."

Remus could sense that Cordelia wasn't being entirely truthful about something, but he didn't know her that well, and so he didn't pry. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you," Cordelia thanked Remus before hurriedly moving the conversation on. "What exactly happened to Harry?"

Remus briefed her quickly on what had happened to Harry. "...and although we don't know exactly why Lockhart did this, we do know that because he's dead, the threat from that quarter has gone."

"You make it sound as though Harry is still under threat," Cordelia noted that Remus hadn't said totally gone.

"He is," Remus felt comfortable in Cordelia's presence, and he therefore opened up a little more to her than he might have done to anyone else he had never met before. "The man who betrayed Harry's parents escaped from Azkaban two months ago, and I'm afraid he'll come after Harry now that he's been discovered to be alive."

"Poor boy," Cordelia immediately commiserated. "I hope that steps are being taken to protect him."

"They are, and I will take good care of Justin and Hannah as well," Remus didn't want Cordelia to think that he was leading her son into danger. "We'll be apparating directly to a side-gate, where hopefully the press won't be camped out, and where there's little danger of being attacked."

"I'm glad to hear it," Cordelia had been concerned after Remus' confidence, but something about this tall, tired-looking man made her feel at ease. She spotted Justin and Hannah standing by the house, an anxious look on her son's face. "I think Justin is more than ready to leave."

"Then I'd better be going," Remus held out his hand. "It's been a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Finch-Fletchley."

"It's Cordelia, and likewise," Cordelia shook Remus' hand, and watched as he walked over to Justin and Hannah, before taking the children's hands and vanishing.

Malfoy Manor

Draco Malfoy picked up the afternoon edition of the Daily Prophet and promptly spat tea all over the tablecloth.

Lucius turned a furious face to his son. "Manners, Draco!"

"Paper," Draco managed to cough out.

Lucius took the paper. "I already know."

"But he's supposed to be dead," Draco squawked.

"Well, now he's back," Lucius put down the newspaper. "Clean up that mess, and then go pack."

"But Dobby can pack for me," Draco protested.

"Dobby didn't make a mess of the tea table," Lucius let Draco know this was punishment for letting his guard down. "Now go."

Draco hurriedly used a cleaning spell, something he believed to be far below him, and then he left the room.

France

Bellatrix waited for Voldemort to finish reading the paper. "It looks as though we won't need Longbottom now."

"I believe in having a back-up plan," Voldemort dropped the paper to the ground, his small misshapen arms tired from holding it. "And Longbottom has already agreed to our terms."

"So are you going to use Potter's blood in the ritual or Dumbledore's?" Bellatrix asked.

"Potter's blood would be preferential," Voldemort decided. "But right now he's going to be well protected, so we will have to bide our time."

"For how long?" Bellatrix asked impatiently.

"For as long as it takes," Voldemort answered, frustrating the woman. "And for now I want to know everything that Potter does, so get Longbottom on it."

"But he didn't agree to help us with that," Bellatrix pointed out.

"If he wants his mother restored, he will do as he's told," Voldemort pointed out. "Now go."

Next Chapter: Harry is visited by Amelia Bones; Amelia gets to view Harry's memory of the Chamber incident, and she makes a decision about Ginny.

Chapter 37: Guilty

31st December 1994

It was almost eight o'clock, and in Minerva's rooms, Harry was sat drinking hot chocolate with Lucy and Minerva when a knock came at the door. "I wonder who that is."

"I'll go," Minerva opened the door to find Charlie Weasley standing there. "Charlie, what can we do for you?"

Charlie glanced over Minerva's shoulder to check that his intended target was there. "I hope you don't mind but I'd like to see Harry."

"As you can see, he's here, so come in," Minerva stood back, and Charlie entered the room.

Once inside, Charlie dropped the basket he had with him, and he held out his arms. "Come here."

Harry didn't need telling twice and launched himself into Charlie's embrace. "It was getting late, so I didn't think you were coming."

"I left a message to say that I would," Charlie reminded Harry, before he released him to check him over. "Well, you look okay."

"I'm fine," Harry assured him. "I think what happened was worse for you lot than for me."

"It certainly was," Minerva said, before turning to Charlie. "Would you like to join us for a hot chocolate?"

"I would," Charlie answered and it was only then that he spotted Lucy. "Sorry, I should have introduced myself before jumping on Harry. I'm Charlie Weasley, a friend of Harry's."

"Lucy Viking, Harry's soon-to-be tutor," Lucy shook hands with him, and her eyes widened as a frisson of something akin to electricity shot up her arm. To hide her uneasiness, she let go of Charlie's hand and sniffed the air. "Something in that basket smells nice."

"I almost forgot. I have goodies," Charlie, who too had felt something, hid his own discomfort by bending down to grab the basket he'd

dropped. Wanting to give himself a few moments to recover, he turned away from Lucy, and handed the basket to Minerva. "They're from Mum. She had Ginny and Hermione baking all afternoon."

Minerva opened up the lid and delightedly pulled out some chocolates that had been labeled 'mint thins'. "These are my favorites."

"Ginny helped Mum make them," Charlie told her, still avoiding looking at Lucy.

"You'll have to thank them both for me," Minerva said as she offered them around.

Harry actively blanched at the sight of them. "Not for me, thank you."

"Are you alright?" Lucy, who was keeping her eyes firmly fixed on anywhere but Charlie, asked in alarm when she saw how pale Harry had gone.

"I'm off chocolates at the moment," Harry said as he spotted some shortcake that was nestled into the basket. "This looks nice. Who baked it?"

"I think Hermione did," Charlie grinned. "She burned the first batch though." He pointed to some savory crackers. "And Ginny baked those – they're really good."

"No thanks, I'm good with this," Harry refused the crackers, and took a small piece of shortbread.

"Ginny and Hermione also made fudge," Charlie pointed to two more boxes that lay in the basket. "And some muffins which are still warm I think."

"Which fudge did Hermione make?" Harry asked without thinking, not really in the mood for muffins.

"The one with the raisins in," Charlie frowned as Harry ignored the chocolate fudge and took a slice of the raisin filled delicacy instead. "Harry, are you upset with Ginny over something?"

"Why?" Harry asked before he bit into the raisin fudge, and gave a contented sigh.

"Because you've refused everything she's made," Charlie pointed out.

"I just preferred what Hermione had made," Harry said, trying to make light of the situation.

"I think it's more than that," Charlie persisted, instinct telling him that there was more to Harry's refusal to eat Ginny's cooking than met the eye. "Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Harry, however, didn't look at Charlie as he made the denial.

Harry's physical reaction made it obvious to Charlie that Harry was obviously hiding something, and he therefore continued to press Harry. "I think you should tell me what's bothering you."

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry immediately responded, letting Charlie know that as he suspected, there was most definitely something wrong.

"I'll go," Lucy offered, thinking Harry didn't want to talk because she was there.

"NO!" Harry almost shouted. "Please stay."

Lucy sat back down. "Will you tell us what's wrong if I stay?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't."

Charlie gently pushed Harry onto the sofa and sat down by him, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry, we all can see that something is wrong, and after your reaction to the food that she's cooked, I'm guessing that it has something to do with Ginny, doesn't it?"

Harry knew that Charlie was going to find out sooner or later, especially if Susan's belief about Ginny was true, and he dropped his head before answering, not wanting to see Charlie's face. "Yes, but I don't want you to blame me."

"Unless you've done something wrong, then I'm not going to be blaming you for anything, but unless you tell me what's happened, I can't help you," Charlie said in a coaxing voice.

"I don't think you can help," Harry answered truthfully.

"Let me be the judge of that," Charlie instructed. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"You won't like it," Harry said nervously.

"I still want to hear it," Charlie responded firmly.

So Harry blurted out what Susan had told him. When he had finished, Harry finally plucked up the courage to meet Charlie's shocked eyes, and subsequently tried to pull free. "I knew you wouldn't like it. You're angry with me, aren't you?"

"I'm just a little stunned, Harry," Charlie responded, tightening his grip around Harry. "If Ginny has done what you think she has, then this is a serious matter."

"I know," Harry had spent hours thinking about it. "And I keep hoping that it isn't true but what if Susan is right?"

"I don't know. But what I do want to know is, do you think Ginny did it?" Charlie asked. When Harry didn't respond, Charlie gently said, "I won't be angry, no matter what you say."

"Yes, I think she did," Harry slowly nodded, before going on a little hesitantly. "At least I think so, but I don't know."

Charlie shook his head in dismay. "I know you said previously that you only wanted to be her friend, but when I found out you two were dating I just thought you'd changed your mind, and not that Ginny might have used a love potion on you."

Harry was surprised that Charlie was actually considering his claim, and hadn't defended Ginny. "I really thought that when you found out, that you would be angry with me, and not believe me."

"I love my sister dearly, Harry, but I also love you, and I know that you wouldn't accuse her of something like this without good reason," Charlie rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "But I have to be honest; I'm really hoping that this is all just a bad coincidence."

"So am I," Harry said but deep down he didn't truly believe what he was saying.

"I think I need to have a talk with Ginny," Charlie decided, "to get to the bottom of things."

"You can't say anything," Harry immediately tried to dissuade Charlie from his decided course of action. "If it isn't true, Ginny would be hurt, and I don't want to do that to her."

"And what if it is true?" Charlie asked. "How will you feel about Ginny then?"

"I don't know," Harry answered truthfully. "And I probably won't know until I know for sure."

"And how do you know that you ever will unless you ask her?" Minerva joined in the conversation.

"Because Susan sent me a letter this morning to say that her Aunt is coming here to see me tomorrow," Harry told her. "She wants to talk about Ginny, as well as what happened in the Chamber."

Charlie quickly mulled over what Harry had told him. "Harry, I won't say anything to Ginny but do you mind if I talk this over with Mum? She always knows what to do."

Harry trusted Mrs. Weasley, and he therefore nodded. "But only her."

Charlie got to his feet, and apologized to Minerva. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I really need to talk to Mum as soon as I can," Charlie wanted to speak to Molly desperately, not really knowing what to think about Ginny. He didn't want to believe that his sister would do something so horrible but he also didn't believe that Harry's accusations were entirely groundless. And most of all, he was extremely concerned that Amelia Bones had now been brought into the mix.

"Will you come back?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Tomorrow morning before I leave to return to Romania," Charlie wrapped Harry up in a big hug. "Don't get worrying, we're going to get this sorted."

After Charlie had left, Minerva turned to Harry. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to tell anyone until Susan had sorted it out," Harry said miserably. "I didn't think it was fair to Ginny."

Lucy smiled consolingly. "Harry, that was a very mature decision, but your reaction to the food that Ginny had made gave you away."

"I didn't think," Harry had just known that he couldn't eat anything that Ginny had made until he knew for sure if she had used the potion on him or not. "I think I'd better tell you that I haven't been taking my nutritional potions since I talked to Susan and Luna, just in case Ginny made them for Madam Pomfrey. I know it's silly but I just can't swallow them knowing that she might have helped Professor Snape make them."

"That's quite alright," Minerva said, surprising Harry when she didn't tell him off. "I have a friend in Hogsmeade I can visit tomorrow who can brew some nutritional potions for you. He owes me a favor."

Harry had hoped to avoid taking them at all. "Can you ask him to make them taste nice?"

"I can," Minerva promised, before deliberately making an effort to change the subject. "Now, let's talk about something a little less controversial than Miss Weasley."

The Burrow

It was a very long evening for Charlie, who had to wait until everyone except for him and his mother had gone to bed before asking to speak to her. "Mum, I really need to talk to you."

"Let's go into my sewing room," Molly led Charlie into her own private haven, and closed the door behind them. "What's wrong?"

Charlie outlined what Harry had told him. "I worried, Mum, in case it's true."

Molly sat down heavily. "It is true, Charlie."

"WHAT?" Charlie barked out. "You knew that Ginny had done this and you said nothing?"

"She told me on Harry's birthday," Molly responded. "As it was, we all thought Harry was dead, and Ginny said she was sorry, so what good would it have done to bring it up?"

"We could have told Minerva or the Headmaster, especially after the Headmaster gave permission to look for Harry," Charlie answered, an annoyed look on his face.

"But Ginny would have gotten into trouble," Molly protested. "And we had no idea that Harry had survived."

"Luna did," Charlie reminded his mother.

"Luna is a nice girl but expecting everyone to believe that Harry was alive just because she's convinced that he's supposed to be Hermione's soul mate or something like that was absolutely ludicrous," Molly shook her head. "And besides, it's obvious that Hermione and George are meant for each other."

"You don't know that for sure," Charlie wasn't entirely convinced that the couple was a good match.

"Of course I do," Molly was convinced she was right. "George has already said he can't see himself with anyone else."

"I said the same last year about me and Tula," Charlie reminded his mother of a conversation he had had about his unrequited feelings for his boss.

Molly brightened as she caught onto the implication. "You're not in love with her anymore?"

"I don't think I am," Charlie smiled softly as he thought about Lucy. "I think I may have met someone else."

"Who is she?" Molly asked eagerly, always overly interested in her children's romantic lives.

"Lucy Viking, Harry's soon-to-be tutor," Charlie echoed Lucy's own words of introduction.

"Isn't she the girl who is tutoring Hermione?" Molly recalled Hermione mentioning someone named Lucy.

"Yes," Charlie confirmed.

"So when are you going out on a date?" Molly pushed.

"We're not," Charlie rubbed the back of his neck. "I've actually barely spoken two words to her. I only met her a few hours ago when I went to see Harry."

Molly returned to the subject of her daughter. "So she knows about Ginny?"

"She most certainly does," Charlie answered, and he used the opportune opening to bring up who else was in the know. "As does Amelia Bones; Susan was the one who suspected what Ginny had done, she told her aunt, and Amelia Bones is therefore going to see Harry tomorrow to talk over the matter." Charlie watched his mother grow white.

"Harry could lie, and say Susan is mistaken," Molly came up with a suggestion rooted in fear.

"He's not lying. I would never ask him to, and things have already gone too far for them to be salvaged," Charlie was a little annoyed that Molly had made the suggestion at all. "Ginny will have to face whatever consequences come from this."

"She'll go to Azkaban," Molly began to weep softly.

Charlie immediately softened and put his arm around his mother. "I'm sure that while Harry won't be telling lies, he would ask for clemency for Ginny, especially as it was just a one-time thing."

Molly looked up at Charlie. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes," Charlie felt that he knew Harry well enough to say this. "And I'm going back to see him tomorrow."

"Please ask him to go easy on my girl," Molly begged.

"I will," Charlie promised. "Now I told Harry that I would only tell you about Ginny, and I intend to keep that promise. But I think you should talk to Dad, tell him what's happened, but under no circumstances say anything to Ginny. If Amelia Bones decides that there's not enough evidence to bring this up before the Wizengamot, then I don't want to ruin what might be salvaged of Harry and Ginny's relationship."

Molly understood Charlie's viewpoint, and she got to her feet, hugging her son. "You're a good boy."

"I just don't want to see anyone get hurt," Charlie loved both Harry and Ginny, and didn't want either of them hurt over this. "And Mum, Harry was worried this evening that I'd reject him over this, so I think I can safely say that he'll be worried that you'll do the same."

Molly was shocked. "I would never reject Harry. Tell him that I love him, and that he is always welcome here."

"That will mean everything to him," Charlie kissed Molly's cheek. "Do you want me to stay up with you?"

"No, you get off to bed," Molly told Charlie. "I'll be up in a little while." Molly, however, didn't move, and instead she sat and wept in her sewing room.

New Year's Day

The Burrow

A very angry Arthur listened to Molly and her story about Ginny and Harry. "You didn't think it might have been a good idea to tell me before now?"

"I didn't ever expect Harry to be found, and if he was, that he would be dead," Molly could see the disillusionment in Arthur's eyes. "Not that I wanted that."

"I know you didn't but to hide this from me is hurtful, Molly," Arthur was extremely upset that his wife hadn't trusted him enough to tell him what Ginny had done. "I didn't believe we had secrets."

"Normally we don't, but this was a special case," Molly said in her defense.

"A special case that could see our daughter in Azkaban," Arthur kept his voice low but he didn't hide his anger or concern.

"Harry would never do that," Molly countered, remembering Charlie's words from the previous night.

"Harry might not have any say in the matter," Arthur sat down on the bed. "And after what's happened to him, I have a feeling that the Wizengamot might go harder on her than would normally be the case."

"But she's only a child," Molly protested, alarm bringing tears to her eyes.

"That maybe so, but she's a child who has used a potion that's almost as bad as the Imperius curse on the Boy Who Lived," Arthur snapped angrily, before getting back to his feet. "And I have a bad feeling that the Wizengamot will not take kindly to that."

"Where are you going?" Molly asked in alarm as Arthur kicked off his house slippers, and began to put on shoes.

"I'm going into work," Arthur didn't look at Molly as he tied up his laces.

"But it's New Year's Day," Molly protested. "And you haven't had breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," Arthur answered, and not bothering to go downstairs to use the floo as he normally would, he simply vanished.

When she got downstairs, Molly discovered that Charlie had also left to see Harry.

Hogwarts

Charlie arrived at Hogwarts to find Minerva waiting for him. After a long talk with her, he was pointed in the direction of Lucy's rooms. When he arrived, he discovered that, despite the lateness of the hour, Harry was still sleeping. "How late did you stay up last night?"

Lucy smiled as she recalled Harry refusing to go to bed at a civilized time. "It was almost two o'clock when Harry and I headed for bed. He was playing that noisy Muggle board game your Dad got for him, and was determined not to go to sleep until he'd beaten me."

Charlie grinned on hearing about Harry's competitiveness. "So did he manage it?"

Lucy grinned back. "Nope, but he tried."

"There's always next time," Charlie commented before reluctantly picking up his rucksack. "So if he's in bed, it doesn't look as though I'll get to speak to Harry before I leave."

Lucy realized that Harry would be disappointed if he didn't see Charlie. "What time do you have to leave?"

"My shift starts in about half an hour," Charlie had stretched things out as long as he could, but speaking with Minerva had eaten into his limited time.

"I'll wake Harry up then," Lucy offered.

"I don't want to wake Harry unnecessarily. Nothing is going to change what's happening, and he needs all the rest he can get," Charlie said, feeling both relieved and a little guilty that he wouldn't have to face Harry knowing the truth about Ginny. "But will you tell him that Mum said that she loves him and that he's always welcome at the Burrow? And tell him that I love him as well."

"And he really loves you, doesn't he?" Lucy had noticed how much Harry had brightened when Charlie had arrived the previous night.

"Yes, and I'm lucky for that," Charlie held out his hand after checking the time. "Well, I really must be off but I hope to see you again."

"I hope so too," Lucy took Charlie's hand, and, as if drawn towards him, she leant forward and kissed Charlie's cheek. "Happy New Year, Charlie."

Encouraged by Lucy's soft kiss, Charlie took a chance, and drew Lucy into a gentle hug, before returning the sentiment. "Happy New Year, Lucy."

Lucy's face was burning when Charlie let her go, and now feeling more than a little awkward, she hastily tried to send Charlie on his way. "You had better go. You don't wait to be late."

"I don't," Charlie answered, but not wanting to part so quickly from Lucy, he quickly made an impromptu suggestion. "Lucy, I know it's cold outside, but would you like to walk me to the gates?"

Even though she had tried to get rid of him only moments ago, Lucy didn't really want Charlie to leave, and so she agreed to accompany him. "I would."

During their walk, both of them were lost in their own thoughts, and neither said anything until they reached the gates of the school, which were being guarded by a pair of Aurors. "I guess I'd better head back then now that I've seen you safely to the gates." Lucy held out her hand.

"Lucy, I..." Charlie grabbed Lucy's hand, intending to shake it before he shook his head, a small self-mocking smile playing across his lips. "I don't think I want to shake your hand."

As Charlie finished speaking, his grip on her hand tightened, and Lucy found herself being hauled against him. Before she could say anything in protest, Charlie's free hand snaked into her hair, and Lucy's mouth was put to better use than talking as she was thoroughly kissed. When Charlie finally let her go, Lucy was more than a little shocked. "Charlie!"

"I know that was awfully rude of me and that I should apologize," Charlie was almost as surprised at what he'd done as Lucy was. "But I also know that if I could do it again I would."

Lucy's mouth opened and closed, and then opened again. "But we've only just met, and we barely know each other."

"You mean this isn't how all couples do this?" Charlie asked teasingly, to hide his tension at what he'd just uncharacteristically done.

"I don't think so," Lucy answered, her own voice betraying her nervousness. "I think most couples go out to dinner first or something like that."

"I wish I had time to take to you dinner," Charlie smiled down at Lucy. "And that we had more time to talk, but my portkey leaves in a few minutes."

"Then you'd better hurry," Lucy urged, a slight panic setting in that Charlie was going to kiss her again, even though deep down she knew she wanted him to. "And I'd better get back to my rooms to check on Harry."

"Take care of him for me," Charlie brushed a thumb over Lucy's cheek as he spoke, before he lowered his head, and brushed his lips over hers again, this time making no attempt to deepen the kiss. Then he turned away, and headed for the gates, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be in touch."

A completely bewildered Lucy stood and watched as Charlie greeted the Aurors, before heading out of the school gates, and moments later, vanishing. She had no idea as she headed back up to the school that despite his bold moves, in Romania Charlie was just feeling just as shocked by what he'd done.

Later that day

Hogwarts

As Susan had promised, Harry was visited by Amelia Bones in Minerva's rooms, where he and Lucy had returned to after lunch. "Harry, it's nice to see you alive and well."

Harry didn't get a chance to respond as he was wrapped up in a tight hug. "Ummmm."

"Sorry," Tonks let go of Harry. "I'm just so happy to see you. I spent hours looking for you and found nothing."

"You were here?" Harry asked in surprise, no-one having told him.

"I assigned Auror Tonks to continue the search for the Chamber, but once school began again, she was reassigned to other duties until yesterday," Amelia informed Harry.

"So are you here to ask about what happened?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and to talk to you about Miss Weasley," Amelia had had a long discussion with Susan, and had agreed that her worries and Harry's explanation warranted further investigation.

"Do you think that Ginny used a potion on me?" Harry was a little worried by Amelia's stern look.

"That's what I'm going to try to find out, and I think we should deal with that little problem first," Amelia told him, and she then began to ask him numerous questions, most of which Susan herself had covered. When she had finished, she looked thoughtful. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry still had no idea what Amelia believed. "So what do you think?"

"I believe there is enough evidence to conduct a formal interview with Miss Weasley," Amelia had hoped that it was just Susan's imagination, but faced with what Harry had just told her, she now believed otherwise.

"So do you think she's guilty?" Harry asked a little nervously.

"On the record, I have to say that no-one is guilty until they've been questioned, and have either admitted to committing a crime, or

circumstances have shown them to be culpable," Amelia said evasively.

"And off the record?" Lucy asked what no-one else would have dared to.

"I think she's as guilty as sin," Amelia remarked drily.

Harry hadn't expected Amelia to respond so bluntly. "But what if you're wrong?"

"Then Susan will be issuing an apology, and offering up a gift of justice," Amelia had already warned her niece that she would have to do so if such a serious accusation proved groundless.

"Isn't that a bit much?" Harry knew that his own gift had been given because Anna's accusation had been made in public.

"I don't believe so," Amelia said firmly, and when Harry said nothing in response, she moved the conversation on. "Now that we've dealt with Miss Weasley, do you feel up to telling me what happened in the Chamber?"

"I don't really know," Harry said hesitantly. "Some of my memory is all fuzzy. I can remember bits and pieces, like how to call for the stairs but most of it up until I reached the inner cavern is blurry."

"I believe I have an idea," Minerva interjected. "I can ask Albus to extract Harry's memory; I'm sure he'll be amicable to you viewing it in his pensieve."

After the procedure was explained to Harry he agreed to it. He was then led to the Headmaster's office where, after a brief explanation, Albus agreed to Minerva's request. "First we need to extract Harry's memory."

"Will it hurt?" Harry asked, even though what would happen had already been explained to him. But like anyone else who had ever had a memory extracted, he was understandably nervous.

"It just tickles a little," Albus assured Harry, before raising his wand to extract the memory.

As Albus' wand moved away from Harry's head, Harry watched with fascination as a double-ended strand floated at the end of it. "Should that happen?"

"I appear to have extracted two memories," Albus dropped them both into the pensieve. "There has to be a link, otherwise I couldn't have done it. Let's take a look."

At Albus' words, everyone in the room joined hands, and all of them were sucked into the pensieve where they began to view what had happened, the first memory starting earlier than everyone expected.

Harry's First Memory

Harry stormed out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. "I can't believe me he gave me a detention because I didn't know how he'd defeated the Jordanian Whiskered Demon – I'm not even sure there is something called that!"

"It's in one of his books," Justin couldn't remember which one though; they all seemed to blend together after you had read several of them.

"Stupid bloody stupid books!" Harry grumbled.

"I take it you think they're stupid then?" Justin grinned at his friend.

Harry tried to stay mad and couldn't. "Yes, I think they're stupid." He sighed. "It's not fair. Parvati couldn't remember half the answers to his questions, and he didn't put her in detention."

"She's a girl, Harry," Justin reminded him. "And she apologizes so beautifully whereas you scowl at him."

"He's an idiot," Harry said quite rightly.

"But he's also an idiot who's put you in detention," Justin opened the door to the library. "Come on, let's get his crummy homework done."

"That's another thing," Harry moaned as he slumped into the nearest chair. "Write three feet on his aspirations? What does that have to do with defense?"

"I don't know, but at least the answer is easy," Justin flipped open 'Magical Me'. "It's all in here."

Harry reluctantly began to list what Lockhart had claimed were his aspirations. He easily filled three feet, and that was without even making a dent in the list. After he'd finished, he leant back into his seat. "I suppose it could be worse. He could have assigned me a detention during the last game of the season."

"See, that's the best way to look at it," Justin hadn't quite finished his own work. "Why don't you head back to Hufflepuff? I'm going to be a little while longer yet."

Harry shook his head. "Nah, I'll wait for you."

And so once Justin had finished, the two boys headed off together.

The memory then stopped.

Harry turned a little sheepishly towards Albus. "I think that even now I might still be a little annoyed at getting that detention."

"That's why you connected this memory to the detention," Albus told Harry. "Let us continue to what I hope will be the evening of your detention."

Harry's second memory was exactly what Albus had hoped for, and he began the memory, starting right where Lockhart had arrived at Hufflepuff to collect Harry, none of the students being able to go anywhere on their own at that time.

Harry's Second Memory

After Gilderoy Lockhart had collected Harry from Hufflepuff, he said little until they reached an empty classroom. "I think in here will suffice."

Harry walked in, and turned around to ask a question, only to be hit by a spell he didn't see coming. All at once his world became a hazy

mist, and he was aware of Lockhart saying something, but he didn't really care that much what it was; he felt too good.

"Potter, you will make your way to the second floor girls' bathroom where you will head for the sink closest to the window, and you will utter "open" and then "stairs" in Parseltongue," Gilderoy gave Harry his instructions. "Once you have done this, go down the stairs, and when you reach the base of them, wait for me there."

In a happy state, Harry did exactly as Lockhart wanted, but while he walked along his befuddled brain began to discern that something wasn't quite right. By the time Harry had reached the sink, he was beginning to fight hard against the spell that was holding him in its grasp but it still wasn't enough to prevent him from following the order he'd been given. And as Harry hissed out "open", the sink slid back, allowing him access to a deep, dark hole. After hissing out the word 'stairs', Harry made his way to the bottom of them, and then stood and waited for Lockhart to join him.

When Lockhart reached the bottom of the stairs a few minutes later, Harry moved on as ordered, stumbling over the animal skeletons that littered the floor, and falling to his hands and knees. "Ouch."

An unsmiling Gilderoy scowled. "Get up, Potter."

Harry's fuzzy head began to clear even more at the pain emanating from his now bloody hands and knees, and he began to fight even harder against the strange, unsettling feeling that something was very wrong.

Lockhart's attention was now busy elsewhere, and he didn't notice that his subject was starting to slip through his grasp. Harry finally snapped back to himself when a grating noise reached his ears, and he became aware that he was in a darkened cavern, and that a round door surrounded by engraved snakes was rolling back to reveal a large gaping entrance. Lockhart turned back to issue a demand. "Through there, Potter."

"No," Harry refused, beginning to back away from the teacher.

Finally realizing that his subject was no longer under his spell, Lockhart aimed his wand at Harry. "Imperio."

Harry ducked, and aimed his own wand at Lockhart. "Stupefy."

"Reducto," Lockhart yelled out.

As the Reducto spell hurtled towards Harry, fear he was going to die almost overwhelmed him, and he began to incant what was going to end up being an overpowered and panic driven stunning spell. But his efforts were far too late, and Lockhart's Reducto spell glanced off his left leg sending him flying just as he completed the incantation. Flying through the air, Harry's spell went awry as his wand arm flew upwards, and Harry's misaimed spell exploded into the ceiling. For a moment nothing happened, then an almighty rumbling began, and realizing what was happening, Lockhart stopped mid-spell in order to glance up. What he saw drove him to jump backwards, and he was soon lost from Harry's sight as the ceiling came down.

On Harry's side, he had been lucky that the spell had been traveling away from him, but he had still been knocked over by the explosion. After shaking off dust and bits of rock, Harry climbed unsteadily back onto his feet, and looked over at the pile of large rocks that now prevented Lockhart from attacking him but also prevented him from leaving. The boulders were huge, and he had no idea how to remove them without bringing any more of the ceiling down. "Just great!"

Harry turned away from the rock fall, and he was quickly reminded of his leg injury that was now beginning to hurt, and to bleed quite heavily. Knowing a little Muggle first aid, Harry used his tie to stem the flow of blood, and then he limped into the newly opened cavern, and began to search for an alternative way out. He didn't find one. And after an hour of searching, he was getting weaker, so he sat down heavily on the floor, and picked on his second option, not that he expected it to work. "Hello, can anyone hear me?"

No sound came back, and, after several more attempts to call for help in English, Harry decided to try in Parseltongue, especially as he had a vague recollection of Lockhart telling him to use it to get into the cavern. Harry was soon to regret his decision.

The first few times he tried, nothing happened but on his fourth attempt a loud and worrying slithering sound reached Harry's ears, and he glanced over to where the sound was coming from. Harry swallowed hard when he realized that it was coming from the statue

of Salazar Slytherin that dominated the far end of the inner cavern. What was more alarming was the large tongue that flickered out of the statue's mouth, and Harry had the sinking feeling that this had to be the creature that had attacked his friends. So, deciding that he didn't want to end up petrified like them, or end up with his heart torn out like Myrtle, Harry fled back towards the entrance.

He didn't get far though, the rock fall blocking his only way out, and leaving him with nowhere to hide. Harry therefore had no choice but to turn back into the inner chamber. Glancing almost reflexively at the statue as he re-entered the chamber, Harry could now see a snout as well as a tongue, and he shivered with fear when he saw how immense they were. Looking around, he decided that his best option for survival lay in hiding in one of the side tunnels he had found during his search for a way out. Before he could move though, he heard a voice hissing, "kill, kill, kill".

It was then that Harry realized that the creature had to be some sort of snake, but fear was clouding his mind, and he couldn't recall any type of snake that could tear you apart or petrify you. Deciding to try and bluff his way out of the situation, Harry hissed back, "I understand you. I don't want to hurt you but I will if you come out."

The snake creature ignored Harry, and forcing its head forward, it hissed the same mantra over and over again. Harry could now see even more of the snout, and he decided that trying to threaten the thing obviously wasn't working, so he limped off as quickly as he could.

It was a long five minutes for Harry as he crouched at the end of a damp tunnel. Just a small trickle of light came from the well lit chamber beyond. The fact that the chamber had been lit by large torches had surprised Harry, but he had correctly guessed that they were powered by some sort of spell which stopped them burning out. At that moment, he couldn't decide though whether he would have preferred to be totally hidden in the dark, or whether the small amount of light he was receiving was more comforting.

When a small rodent that had run across his feet suddenly went stiff, Harry decided on the former option. Even worse, the hissing mantra had grown far louder, and Harry knew without a doubt that whatever had petrified his friends and the rodent, was right behind him. Too afraid to turn around, Harry cowered in the tunnel clutching his wand,

his eyes firmly closed, and he reverted back to his childhood habit of singing to try and shut out what was happening to him. Only when he felt a hot waft of breath on his neck, did Harry realize that it wasn't helping, and that he had to act or he was probably going to die.

Still too afraid to open his eyes, Harry started to turn around but the speed and angle of his movement was far too much for his injured leg, and it gave way under him, causing Harry to drop to one knee. Now even more vulnerable than ever, Harry reacted instinctively and he swung his arm around and began to incant the Reducto curse. Before he could finish speaking though, a sharp pain unlike like anything he had ever experienced before shot through his arm, and the last syllable came out as a high pitched scream just as Harry opened his eyes in shock and looked into the dimly lit puddle in front of him. He was instantly petrified as he met the Basilisk's eyes in the watery reflection, but his spell flew true, and hit the creature directly in its open mouth. Petrified, Harry didn't feel the warm shower of flesh and blood that rained down on him as the creature died, and because the memory ended as Harry screamed out, everyone else was also spared the hideous sight of the Basilisk's last moments.

Present Time

No-one said anything as they withdrew from the pensive, and it was only after they were all seated before Albus' fireplace that anyone spoke.

"That was quite an adventure, Harry," Amelia remarked in a subdued voice, more than a little shocked at how close Harry's encounter had been.

Tonks too was shocked as well as little awed. "I know I wouldn't have handled that Basilisk as well as you did."

"I was just lucky," Harry had had no idea up until then exactly how lucky he'd been. "I didn't know at the time that it was a Basilisk."

"I should have worked out what was in there," Albus still blamed himself. "But I was convinced that it was most definitely something other than that."

Harry frowned. "So is still there another creature in the Chamber?"

"What makes you ask that, Harry?" Minerva thought Harry's question rather worrisome, given that she'd been in the Chamber when he had been revived.

"Because something had to have ripped out Myrtle's heart, and I know that a Basilisk doesn't kill like that," Harry pointed out. "So if the Basilisk couldn't have killed her, then there had to have been another creature involved."

"Well spotted," Amelia praised Harry. "And given what we've learnt, we're reopening Myrtle's case as well as reconsidering Cedric Diggory's death, as I now believe that the Basilisk was responsible for Cedric's death, and that it wasn't just a case of natural causes."

"Poor Cedric," Harry remembered his fallen Housemate, before a thought occurred to him. "So could Myrtle have been killed by the Basilisk, and then have had her heart ripped out by a person rather than a creature?"

"That's one possibility, and it's one that Miss Granger also brought up," Amelia said in a grave voice, before once again offering out praise. "It's a pity I can't award points. You have now offered up two very keen observations."

"I concur and can award points," Albus smiled at Harry. "Ten points to Hufflepuff."

Harry was delighted, having seen the points counter that morning. "Slytherin are going to be really mad. With the points you awarded to everyone who helped rescue me, it puts them well behind this year."

"I can always remove them," Albus warned with a smile on his face that said otherwise, before he returned to the subject of Lockhart. "Harry, after seeing your first memory, I do believe that I still owe you and everyone else in this school an apology for exposing you all to Gilderoy Lockhart. And you should know that when you rejoin your classmates, you will find that Professor Lupin is a far better teacher, and there will most definitely be no essays on his aspirations."

"I hope not," Harry wasn't so sure though, his first experience of Remus not exactly endearing the teacher to him.

When no-one seemed to have anything else to say, Amelia stood up. "Well, Harry, my business with you is almost done for today but before I go, I want to give you this," Amelia held out a familiar pass, and tapped it. "I took this back when they were going through your belongings but I think it should be returned to you."

Harry took the Ministry pass from the woman, and gaped. "Auror Second Class?"

"That's an honorary position," Amelia cautioned Harry. "I'm awarding it to you so that you can use any spell except for the killing curse in order to defend yourself without repercussions."

"But the Basilisk and Lockhart are dead," Harry said in a confused voice. "Why do I need to defend myself?"

"Because just over two months ago a prisoner escaped from Azkaban, a very dangerous prisoner named Sirius Black, who may well be coming here," Amelia informed Harry.

"Why would he come here?" Harry said without thinking.

"Because Black is a former Death Eater, and like everyone else, he's probably now aware that you're alive," Amelia filled Harry in.

"So how did he escape from a prison you aren't supposed to be able to break out of?" Harry asked - he'd always been told that Azkaban was impossible to escape from.

"We don't yet know," Amelia had been furious when she had found out that Black had gotten out. "But he's not the only escapee. His cousin escaped a few months earlier, and like Black, she too has gone to ground."

"So do you know how she escaped?" Harry asked, a little annoyed that no-one had told him about the escaped prisoners.

"She killed several guards and a nurse, and stole a portkey," Amelia had since changed the rules so that now portkeys were keyed specifically to an individual and only capable of carrying one person.

Harry shivered. "Did Black kill anyone?"

"No, he simply vanished," Amelia still had not been able to work out how Sirius had gotten free.

"So I've got two Death Eaters coming after me?" Harry asked, even though he already thought he knew the answer.

He discovered from Amelia moments later that the pair were more than just Death Eaters. "They're not just ordinary Death Eaters, Harry. Bellatrix Lestrange was believed to be one of You-Know-Who's Inner Circle. But Sirius Black is worse. He was not only believed to be the right-hand man of You-Know-Who, but he was also the person who betrayed your parents to him."

Harry now understood why Amelia had given him permission to use almost any spell necessary. "So he's going to be coming after me to finish what he started, isn't he?"

"We believe so," Amelia answered honestly. "But I will do everything I can to keep you safe, and I have already had Gringotts set up external wards so that anyone who isn't on school business will be unable to enter without a member of staff keying them into the wards. And given the immediate danger, a team of Aurors will remain on the premises until both prisoners have been caught."

Harry felt a great deal more comfortable knowing what measures were in place. "So will I be allowed out at all?"

"If you have a teacher escorting you, then yes," Albus had decided to curtail all Hogsmeade visits for third to fifth years now that Harry had been found alive. "And unless you are a sixth year or above, there will be limited access into Hogsmeade."

"I can use owl post," Harry decided he would be mad to leave the safety of the school.

Amelia reiterated what the pass meant. "Harry, don't forget can you use whatever force you have to, and I don't want you to hesitate in doing so if you feel threatened."

"I won't," Harry promised.

Amelia checked the time. "I really must be off now." She then surprised Harry by bending over and kissing his cheek. "I have to set things up for Miss Weasley's interview."

"Interview?" Albus asked, not having had a chance to talk to Amelia alone since she'd talked to Susan, and then Harry.

"It appears that Miss Weasley may have used Amortentia or a similar potion on Harry," Amelia quickly informed Albus. "I was coming to see you tomorrow to talk about it after I had dealt with another matter this afternoon."

"Given that you're currently here, perhaps we should talk about Miss Weasley right now if you are amenable to changing your plans," Albus suggested.

"Amelia, Ginny won't go to Azkaban, will she?" Harry interrupted the couple, his question solely prompted by concern for Charlie and his family.

"I only enforce the rules, Harry," Amelia said softly. "I don't make them."

"But what if I don't want to press charges?" Harry wasn't about to put the Weasleys through the embarrassment of Ginny going to prison.

"It's out of your hands now," Albus could see that Harry was going to fret, and he softened the blow a little. "But with you being who you are, I don't see why you couldn't use your status to make a plea on Miss Weasley's behalf if it comes down to her being brought before the Wizengamot. As head of the group, I am always willing to listen to a worthy plea."

Harry didn't like using his status in such a manner, but he was willing to do so if it helped the Weasleys, who had only been kind to him. "Then I want to do that if it happens."

"Then we'll let you know the outcome as soon as we can," Amelia promised. "Oh, and before I forget, I want you to return to BritAD at Easter to receive a few days' intensive training." Amelia normally wouldn't have done such a thing but she was highly concerned for Harry's safety. "So I will arrange for you to travel home with Susan, and then afterwards, I will deliver you to wherever you wish to go next."

"Thank you," Harry slipped the pass into his pocket, and with Minerva, Tonks, and Lucy trailing him, they left Albus and Amelia alone.

Once inside Minerva's rooms, Tonks hugged Harry again. "It really is great to see you safe and well."

"I'm sorry if you had a bad time," Harry had apologized to everyone who had been worried about him, even though it hadn't been his fault.

"I suppose I'll forgive you this time," Tonks teased. "But you have no idea how much trouble you got me into disappearing like that."

"Trouble?" Harry was lost as to how he could have done so.

"I have a short fuse, and I was upset around your birthday, and got into a few fights," Tonks explained.

"Fights?" Harry's eyes almost bugged out of his head. "You must have gotten into serious trouble over that."

"Not exactly," Tonks had to admit. "Madam Bones assigned me here, and I spent a miserable month trying to find the entrance to the Chamber. I searched that darned bathroom everyday but didn't spot the snake on the tap."

"I was really lucky, wasn't I?" Harry shivered. "If Hermione hadn't wanted a drink, then I might have been left down there forever."

"Yes," Lucy squeezed Harry's hand. "But thankfully that didn't happen, and you're safe and sound again."

"Unless those prisoners come after me," Harry remarked in a dismal voice.

"Which is why you're going back to the Ministry at Easter," Tonks grinned. "I'm going to be your mentor while you stay there."

Harry immediately cheered up. "That's brilliant."

"As long as I don't get booted out of the Division for fighting," Tonks winked at Harry. "I have to go now as I'm part of the guard being left here for the first week of school. See you at dinner."

Harry was delighted that Tonks would be around, but he was also a little nervous as to what was going to happen to Ginny, and he turned to the one person he thought might know. "Lucy, do you know what will happen to Ginny now?"

Lucy did. "Amelia will probably set out what she knows so far to the Headmaster as head of the Wizengamot. She will then interview Ginny, and if she finds that Ginny is guilty, then the Headmaster will decide on what Ginny's punishment will be."

"Does he decide on everyone's punishment?" Harry asked, thinking it would make Albus extremely busy if he did.

"If it's deemed serious enough, then yes," Lucy had seen Albus at work more than once, courtesy of Amelia. "But if he decides that he can't deal with the matter on his own and that it needs to go before the Wizengamot, then a session will be set up to try the case."

"I don't want that," Harry hated being exposed.

"It might not come to that," Lucy tried to allay Harry's fears. "Ginny is underage, and it's a one-off offence. I believe that the Headmaster will consider it a case of a childhood crush gone wrong more than anything else."

"I hope that's the case," Harry said, his face creased with worry.

"I tell you what, let's take our broomsticks out," Lucy could see that Harry needed a diversion. "But you can't stray from the school grounds; I don't want to explain why you vanished again."

"I won't stray," Harry promised before realizing what Lucy's comment meant. "You can fly?"

"I was a chaser for my house team," Lucy revealed. "So I think the answer is yes."

Harry was now thoroughly diverted. "So, who did you play for?"

"I played for a few weeks for the magical branch of Oxford University, but my workload was too heavy so I dropped it. But before that I attended Salem Girls' School, where I played from my third year for my house, which was named Good House after Sarah Good, a young woman accused of being a witch in the Salem Witch Trials," Lucy told Harry as they walked along the corridor back to her rooms.

"Was she really a witch?" Harry asked with interest.

Lucy shook her head. "None of the individuals accused were."

Harry had a vague recollection from his mind-numbing history lessons that a wizarding community was already in existence at the time of the Trials, and so he questioned their lack of action. "So why did no-one rescue them?"

"Because the American magical world back then was very young, and they were also very afraid of being discovered and persecuted themselves," Lucy opened up her closet as she answered.

"But they had real magic," Harry pointed out. "It wasn't fair that innocent people had to die when the magical world could have helped to save them."

"The wizarding world was just as frightened as the Muggle world of the witch hunts," Lucy answered. "And no-one was willing to risk their lives or revealing their world."

"Well, I think they were wrong," Harry declared vehemently. "If it had been me, I would have done everything I could to help an innocent person."

"I do believe you would," Lucy smiled as she changed the subject, and withdrew her broomstick. "So are you ready to fly?"

Anything else Harry had intended to ask about the Salem Witch Trials went out of the window when he saw Lucy's broomstick. "You have a Firebolt!"

Lucy grinned. "I traded in my Nimbus 2000 for it when it came out."

"But they're really expensive," Harry took the broomstick when Lucy offered it to him.

"My house belonged to my aunt, and I therefore live rent free," Lucy explained. "My parents paid for my schooling, and I'm not the partying type, so apart from food and clothing, I don't really have to spend much of what I earn, hence my splurging on this baby."

"Could I possibly have a go?" Harry asked hopefully.

"You can use it until you get fed up," Lucy offered, guessing quite correctly that she probably wouldn't get to ride her own broomstick at all that day. "Let's get your broomstick for me to use."

A delighted Harry headed off with Lucy in the direction of Hufflepuff, any thoughts of Ginny, witch trials or anything else for that matter, completely obliterated with thoughts of riding on what was reputed to be the best and most expensive broomstick the wizarding world had to offer.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers that Ginny is guilty; Ginny is dismayed at Harry's reaction to her; Luna reveals a crush.

Chapter 38: Friends No More

January 1st 1995

The Ministry

Amelia knocked on Arthur's cubicle. "Arthur, I was surprised to discover you were here. Molly told me you'd come in."

"I had some work I wanted to catch up on," Arthur had tried burying himself in work to get over his worry and disappointment. "What is it?"

Amelia filled him in about Harry and Ginny. "So I would like you to act as a witness in this matter because your daughter is underage."

"When do you want to interview her?" Arthur asked, not betraying the fact that he already knew what Ginny had done, and was now feeling guilty about not being able to reveal that he knew.

"Now," Amelia had decided to get it over and done before school began. "I think it best if you collect Ginny and bring her here."

"I'll go now," Arthur stood up and headed out of the offices.

Twenty Minutes Later

A very frightened Ginny's heart almost stopped when she entered the room she'd been taken to and found the Head of BritAD waiting for her. "Is something wrong?"

"Please sit down, Miss Weasley," Amelia indicated the chair in the center of the room. "Before we begin, the law dictates that I identify myself. For the record I am Amelia Susan Bones, Head of British Auror Division. Please identify yourself."

"Dad?" Ginny asked in a frightened voice.

"Ginny, please do as Madam Bones has asked," Arthur hated seeing his daughter look so frightened but he wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"My name is Ginevra Molly Weasley," Ginny gave her full name and sat down.

"Miss Weasley, you have been accused of using an illegal substance to compel Harry James Potter to believe he was in love you," Amelia set out the charge. "Your father has agreed that we may use Veritaserum during the course of this interview, and I will be administering it in a moment. But before we begin, do you have anything you wish to say?"

Ginny's heart began to beat quickly. "What illegal substance?"

"It has been suggested that you used either Amortentia or Aestustentia on Mr. Potter," Amelia said, and then easily spotting that Ginny was beginning to worry, she pushed a little. "Did you, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny's head dropped, and aware that she wouldn't be able to lie under Veritaserum, she decided to come clean before it was used. "Yes, I used Amortentia."

"Ginny!" Arthur exclaimed in horror, as even though he knew it to be true, it was a vastly different matter to hear it directly from his daughter.

"Mr. Weasley, please," Amelia believed this was a complete shock to Arthur, but she had to get to the bottom of things. "Why did you use it?"

"I wanted Harry to like me," Ginny said desperately. "And I wanted him to go out with me but he said he only liked me as a friend, and I loved him so much. Then he told me that he had intended to ask Hannah out before she was petrified, so I used the Amortentia because I didn't want to lose him to Hannah when she was revived."

"If that is the case, why did you administer the antidote?" Amelia asked, revealing that somehow she knew what Severus had done.

"I had time to think over the summer," Ginny didn't mention that she had told her mother, who had had several long talks with her. "And when I found out that Harry was alive, I didn't think it was right to continue to trick him, so I used an antidote from Professor Snape's stores, and he took it up to Harry for me."

Amelia jumped on the implication of Ginny's words. "Professor Snape aided you in this matter?"

"No, I stole the antidote, and told him that it was a nutritional potion - they're similar in color and texture," Ginny answered, giving a partial truth.

"So why would you have made a nutritional potion if you'd only just discovered that Harry was alive?" Amelia queried, having a fairly good knowledge of potions. "Don't they take a few hours to produce?"

"Yes," Ginny nodded. "But I had been helping Professor Snape to make them for Madam Pomfrey, ready for when school began."

Amelia accepted Ginny's excuse as plausible, but she still had a problem with Severus' involvement. "Why didn't you take the potion up yourself?"

"I was too upset when I found out that Harry was alive, and so when Professor Snape said he was going to replace the potions that I dropped when I first saw Harry, I asked him to take a potion up for Harry," Ginny told both truths and lies to make a plausible sounding story in the hope that now she had seemingly come clean, Veritaserum would not be used, thus avoiding dragging her mother and Professor Snape into her mess.

Amelia could see how frightened Ginny was, but she still went on to make a very important point. "When you administered the Amortentia, did you realize that its use is akin to having cast the Imperius curse?"

A now white-faced and terrified Ginny shook her head. "No, I didn't."

Amelia believed her. "And do you regret what you've done?"

Ginny did. "Yes, and I'm sorry."

"Very well, I need some time to consider what you've told me," Amelia pointed to a side door. "Please go in there and wait to be called."

Once Ginny was out of the room, Arthur turned to Amelia. "I am so sorry."

"So am I, Arthur," Amelia liked and trusted the Weasley patriarch.

"What will you do?" Arthur was extremely angry with Ginny, but like any parent he was still worried about his daughter's fate.

"I'm afraid I have little choice but to bring this before Albus as the Head of the Wizengamot. He already knows that I was going to interview Ginny, and so what happens next will be down to him," Amelia said regretfully.

"I understand," Arthur got along well with Albus, but he didn't expect him to make an exception just because Ginny was his daughter. "When will you do so?"

"As soon as possible," Amelia thought it best to have the whole sordid mess dealt with as soon as possible. "I'd rather get this cleared up before school begins. But I'm afraid that before I return to see Albus, there is another matter I have to deal with first. If you would wait here, I will return as soon as I can."

Arthur was left alone as Amelia vanished, but he made no attempt to enter the room Ginny was in, having decided that it would do her good to let her think about what she had done, and what might well happen to her.

Hogwarts

Out flying with Lucy, Harry had no idea of what was happening behind the scenes, and he finally and most definitely reluctantly gave back to the Firebolt to Lucy. "That was absolutely amazing."

Lucy had been impressed with how Harry had handled the broomstick. "You were pretty amazing yourself."

Harry grinned and went red. "Thanks, but the broom helped."

"I think it was mostly you," Lucy challenged Harry's statement before she shivered. "However, I think we should go in now, and get some hot chocolate. I'm freezing."

Harry quickly agreed, and soon the two of them were once again in Lucy's rooms, both sipping fragrant hot chocolate, topped with marshmallows, Harry constantly glancing over at the broomstick that he'd fallen in love with. Lucy smiled when she caught his look. "You really loved it, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed happily. "I didn't think it would be so fast or so easy to handle."

"You can use it again if you want to," Lucy offered.

Harry gave another contented sigh. "Thanks." He looked over at the broomstick yet again. "Charlie would love that."

"Charlie?" Lucy tried not to seem too interested.

"He used to play quidditch for Gryffindor – he was a seeker," Harry informed her.

Lucy was surprised. "He's a bit big for a seeker, isn't he?"

"He didn't used to be so big," Harry passed on what Charlie had told him. "He only bulked up when he began his new job."

"How long has Charlie been working with dragons?" Lucy couldn't resist trying to find out a little more about him.

Harry thought for a moment before answering, "Ever since he left since school, so about three or four years."

Lucy almost choked on the marshmallow she had in her mouth. "He's only twenty-one?"

Harry patted Lucy on the back. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Lucy mopped up the hot chocolate that she had spilled on hearing how old Charlie was. "I was just caught by surprise at how young Charlie is."

"He's actually twenty-two," Harry clarified Charlie's age. "His birthday was on 12 December."

"I thought he was a little older," Lucy was more than a little surprised to find that Charlie was almost eight years younger than her.

"I thought he was older as well at first," Harry had to admit, but even so he was still a little surprised at Lucy's reaction to the news.

"So I take it that he's not married then?" Lucy asked casually.

Ever oblivious, Harry shook his head. "No. He doesn't even have a girlfriend but I know he likes his boss."

Lucy experienced a pang of jealousy at Harry's words. "So why haven't they gotten together?"

Charlie had told Harry how he felt about Tula when the two of them had discussed girlfriends after Ginny's abortive attempt to ask Harry out. However, he had no intention of sharing something that private, not even with someone as friendly as Lucy. "I think it's because they work together."

"It can be problematic, I suppose," Lucy murmured. Any more questions about Charlie were curtailed by a knock on the door.

"I'll get it," Harry put down what was left of his hot chocolate to find Amelia standing there. "Do you want me or Lucy?"

"I need you to come to the Headmaster's office," Amelia smiled at Lucy. "I'll bring him back as soon as I can."

"I need to go home," Lucy informed her, having made a snap decision to collect her old quidditch gear; she would be far more comfortable in it if she took Harry out again. "So Harry is free to do whatever he wants after you've finished with him."

Harry turned around. "Thanks for letting me use your Firebolt."

"We'll do it again," Lucy promised.

Amelia didn't say anything as they walked along, and Harry was too nervous to ask her anything. When they arrived at Albus' office,

Harry's stomach went into freefall when he saw that not only was the Headmaster in the room, but also Arthur Weasley.

"I see Amelia found you, Harry," Albus had seen the look Harry had given Arthur, and he decided to take that worry away. "Arthur, would you mind waiting in my sitting room while we talk to Harry?"

"Not at all," Arthur smiled at Harry and got up, but before he left he addressed Harry. "Harry, I know what this meeting is about, and before it begins, I just want you to know that whatever ruling is made about Ginny, both Molly and I will always welcome you into our home."

"Charlie left a message for me from Mrs. Weasley but I didn't know for sure," Harry's voice was somewhat shaky as he was more than a little overcome with emotion at Arthur's words, and more than a little relieved that he wouldn't have to explain to Arthur why Ginny had been brought up before the head of the Wizengamot, and the Head of BritAD. "But won't it make things awkward at the Burrow if Amelia decides that Ginny is guilty?"

Aware that Albus and Amelia would probably be very unhappy with him if he said anything, Arthur couldn't tell Harry that he already knew Ginny was guilty. "If that is the case, then it will be Ginny at fault, and not you, Harry, and Ginny will have to learn to live with her mistakes."

Harry smiled a little shyly at Arthur. "Thank you, Sir."

Arthur moved forward and briefly hugged Harry. "I think I had better leave you to get on with things."

As Arthur left the room, Amelia immediately moved to sit by Harry, as Albus retook his seat behind his chair. "Harry, before we begin, we both want you to know that you have nothing to worry about, and that we have found out the truth about what happened between you and Miss Weasley."

"And?" Harry asked, barely able to get the word out for nerves, which seemed to have exploded out of nowhere.

"Miss Weasley admitted to administering Amortentia to you via the chocolates you told me about," Amelia said gently.

Harry felt his stomach go over, but something was puzzling him, and once again recovering his voice he asked, "I know I wasn't wearing the cufflinks the night Ginny gave me the chocolates but why didn't the cufflinks get rid of the Amortentia the next day?"

"I spoke to Anna Jameson before I came here, and she said to apologize to you for not explaining about the cufflinks in more detail," Amelia had had quite a talk with the former Hufflepuff. "She said to tell you that the cufflinks work like a bezoar if you are wearing them when a poison, or in this case, a love potion is administered, but otherwise it can be considered to be more like a Muggle bullet-proof vest. She also said that she is really sorry she didn't make that clear."

Harry was a little surprised that Anna knew about the vests. "How does she know about Muggle bullet-proof vests?"

"Anna's father does a lot of business dealings in the Muggle world, so Anna is very au fait with it," Amelia told Harry before going on. "But that wasn't all I found out. I also explained to her, as a matter of necessity, what had happened between you Lockhart, and I asked about the cufflinks' failure to shield you against the Imperius curse."

"I bet they don't work against Unforgivable curses, do they?" Harry had already guessed this much as he had been wearing the cufflinks when Lockhart had attacked him.

"Actually they won't stop an Unforgivable curse but they can help to mitigate it, except for the killing curse of course," Amelia relayed what Anna had told her. "And given what Anna has told me, I now believe that it is the cufflinks that helped you to fight back against Lockhart's hold."

"And what about the Basilisk poison?" Harry had also wondered about that.

"Only phoenix tears works against that type of poison but the cufflinks would have kept you alive long enough to seek help if you hadn't been petrified," Amelia outlined what else Anna had told her. "Finally, Anna said that if there is anything she can do for you to help you get over this, then let her know. She said she feels awful about what happened."

"It wasn't her fault," Harry didn't blame Anna for the cufflinks' failure to protect him more than once; neither of them could have foreseen Ginny's actions, nor those of Lockhart. "And at least I know what the cufflinks can do now."

"You do," Amelia agreed, before returning the conversation back to Ginny. "And with that behind us, we need to talk about Miss Weasley's punishment."

Albus took back over the reins. "Harry, before I pass any judgment on her, I wanted to talk to you. As an Auror Second Class, even an honorary one, this gives you the right to have a hand in helping decide on the punishment of your assailant."

"It's another one of the reasons I awarded you the position," Amelia knew that she was bending the rules, but with Charlie and Harry being so close, she hadn't wanted to jeopardize Harry's relationship with him.

As it was, Harry's first thoughts were about the Weasleys. "You can't send Ginny to prison. It would be terrible for her family."

"I would have to deem this case worthy of being brought before the Wizengamot for that to happen, but it is still something I have to consider," Albus wasn't going to say that he didn't believe the matter to be serious enough without hearing what Harry had to say first. "Now, I would like to hear what you think I should do."

Harry thought about how he was feeling, and what he wanted. "Okay then. To be truthful I'm both really angry and hurt by what Ginny has done but I don't want to send her somewhere like Azkaban."

"So what do you propose I do?" Albus asked, more than a little intrigued by what Harry might come up with.

"First of all I want an apology from her," Harry also wanted to know why Ginny had done it. "And I think that Ginny should be made to give up some of her time to help Susan or other students who are struggling with their potions homework for a set number of weeks, you know like Muggle community service."

"I doubt that Susan will accept that offer," Amelia warned Harry, knowing her niece well enough to say so. "And most students will not want to admit that they are struggling."

"It doesn't matter. Ginny should still have to make the offer," Harry told Susan's aunt, "And I don't want Ginny anywhere near me."

"She would have to move houses for that to happen," Albus said.

Harry was now more than a little stumped as to what to do. "I don't want to embarrass her family, just in case she ends up somewhere like Slytherin."

"If that is what has to happen, Harry," Amelia interjected. "Then that is what has to happen."

Harry shook his head. "It wouldn't be fair for Ron or the twins, particularly Ron. He would literally feel as though his world had come to an end if Ginny wound up in Slytherin."

Albus suspected that that might well be the case, given Ginny's devious conduct. "As an alternative, I can have her barred from common areas and forced to stay in her dormitory."

Harry thought this option over before answering. "It would make things tough for her. She should be allowed to use the common room if I'm not in it, and if I'm in the library then she should have to leave."

"How about if I arrange a designated time for her to use the library?" Albus suggested.

"That would work," Harry agreed. "And I want her kicked off the quidditch team; Justin told me that she rejoined at the start of the year. I know I'm not on it at the moment but I will be trying out again next year."

"I agree with Harry, and I would suggest that you should bar her from all communal sports," Amelia said to Albus.

"I concur," Albus rubbed his chin. "I also need to sort out her scholarship."

"Please don't take that from her," Harry pleaded. "Her parents bought her a new cauldron, aprons, and a wand for getting it, and I'd hate to see it go to waste, and besides," here Harry pulled a face, "she's spending time with Snape."

"Quite," Amelia was hard pushed not to laugh at the disgusted look on Harry's face. "Now this is there anything else, Harry?"

"I don't think so," Harry decided that Ginny was going to be punished enough, particularly if she lost the scholarship, as he suspected was going to be the case.

"I need a moment," Albus then began to make notes, and when he'd finished writing up his decision, he looked up. "Right, Harry. In the light of what you would like and what I have determined is fair, this is what I have decided upon. I am not going to bring Miss Weasley up before the Wizengamot because of your plea on behalf of her family, and because this appears to be a matter of an infatuation that has gotten out of hand."

Harry was glad that Lucy's suspicion had proved correct. "Thank you, Sir."

"But she is going to be punished," Albus couldn't let such a major offense go unpunished. "Therefore Miss Weasley will no longer be allowed to participate in any communal events including the dueling club which Professor Lupin now conducts. She will also be denied access to Hogsmeade unless it is school-related until she reaches her fifth year, at which time I will reconsider her conduct. And she will be banned from ever playing quidditch at Hogwarts again. She will also only be allowed access to the library during the hours of 5.30p.m. and 6.30p.m."

"And what about her scholarship?" Harry asked, his main concern being how much money he suspected it had cost Arthur and Molly, even with the scholarship funds in place.

"I'm afraid that it is Ministry money that funds the scholarship, and with a recorded infraction like this, they will no longer continue to do so," Albus answered regretfully.

Harry sighed, knowing how disappointed Arthur and Molly were going to be. "So she's off the scholarship for good?"

"I'm afraid so unless she can find her own money to fund it," Albus knew, however, that Ginny was unlikely to be able to do so.

"Her family could never afford it," Harry said, and feeling bad for Arthur and Molly, and the sacrifices they'd made, he therefore made a suggestion. "But I could."

"I don't think Arthur would accept it," Amelia got to her feet. "But I could ask him to come back in if you wish, and we can ask him."

Harry nodded. "Please."

Once Arthur re-entered the room, Albus outlined what had been decided on so far. "Harry has agreed to continue to fund Ginny's scholarship out of his love for you and your family."

Arthur was touched by Harry's kind offer, but he immediately refused. "Harry is not paying for anything of the kind. Ginny has done something that needs to be punished, and if it means losing the scholarship, then so be it."

"Very well," Amelia looked across at Albus. "Is that everything?"

"Not quite," Albus hadn't yet finished. "Miss Weasley will also be suspended from Hogwarts for three weeks." He glanced at Arthur. "As Ginny is underage, and you are here as her representative, I need to know whether you will be filing an appeal against my ruling."

"I will not," Arthur confirmed.

Albus then turned to Harry. "As the injured party, and as an Auror Second Class, do you agree with my decision?"

Harry thought over what Albus had decided, before slowly nodding, "Yes, but I'd still like the apology, and the offer from Ginny to coach anyone in potions who needs it – Ginny will definitely have enough time now that she's not taking part in the scholarship."

"Then that is what will happen," Albus got to his feet. "You will leave the room, Harry, and Miss Weasley will be brought back in. I will announce her punishment, and you may then rejoin us."

"Can I actually talk to her alone afterwards?" Harry asked, wanting to know why Ginny had done what she had.

"Yes, so if you want to go into my sitting room, I'll send her in when I've finished," Albus nodded towards the door that led into the room.

Having had some time for the truth to sink in, when Ginny came into the sitting room some thirty minutes later, Harry was far angrier and far more hurt that he had been when he'd been speaking to the group outside.

His face reflected his feelings, and Ginny almost flinched at the lack of warmth Harry was displaying. She smiled nervously at him. "Harry, the Headmaster said you wanted to speak to me."

Harry stared impassively at Ginny, finding it hard to believe that he had ever thought himself in love with her. "I do but first I believe you have something to say to me."

Ginny fulfilled the first part of her punishment. "I'm sorry I used the Amortentia on you, Harry. Please accept my apology."

"Apology accepted," Harry wanted to tell Ginny to shove it but after asking for the apology, he opted for the more polite route, before going on to what he needed to know the most. "So why did you do it, Ginny?"

"Because I loved you and I wanted to be with you," Ginny said in a quiet voice, before admitting that she still felt the same way. "I still do."

"And what about Corner?" Harry asked. "If you want to be with me, why are you dating him?"

A little spark of hope ignited in Ginny at Harry's words, and she immediately dismissed her current boyfriend. "I was lonely, but if you still wanted to go out with me, I'd finish with him for you."

Harry was more than a little disgusted by Ginny's declaration. "I hardly think that that would be fair."

Ginny stepped closer, encouraged that Harry hadn't dismissed her out of hand going back out with her. "Harry, I know you must have been

hurt finding out about Michael, but he really doesn't mean anything to me. It's you I love you."

Harry immediately refuted Ginny's statement. "If you love someone you don't trick them into going out with you."

"I only did it because I didn't know what else to do," Ginny said in a voice laced with pleading for Harry to understand why she had done what she had. "You turned me down, and when you told me about Hannah, I knew that you'd ask her out once she'd been unfrozen if I didn't do something to get you first."

"Get me first?" Harry was appalled by Ginny's turn of phrase. "I'm not a possession."

"I know that," Ginny went to reach out to touch Harry, only for him to step away from her. "Harry, please understand."

"But I don't," Harry folded his arms and stepped even further away from the wide-eyed and pleading girl. "Forcing me to go out with you was wrong, Ginny."

"But you were happy when we were together, weren't you?" Ginny's voice was full of desperation.

"Because you put me under a spell," Harry said in a stunned voice, barely able to believe what he was hearing. "Ginny, I meant it when I said I only saw you as friend when you asked me out that Christmas. You said you understood."

"I lied," Ginny's voice quavered. "When you said no, you hurt me, Harry."

"I know that and I said I was sorry," Harry backed away once more when Ginny stepped closer to him. "Ginny, why didn't you tell me how you felt rather than trying to continually feed me chocolates laced with Amortentia?"

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked innocently.

Harry had hoped that Ginny would be honest about what she'd done, but it was obvious that she was going to continue lying, even now.

"Ginny, I know that the chocolates you'd been giving me all summer were also laced with Amortentia."

"I still don't know what you mean," Ginny continued to plead her innocence.

"I was wearing my cufflinks every time you gave me those chocolates until that last time when you succeeded, Ginny," Harry said softly. "The cufflinks acted to make the chocolates smell bad. I didn't realize that until today though, when Amelia explained what the cufflinks were actually capable of."

"You can't prove that," Ginny challenged.

"No, but I could ask Professor Dumbledore to review the case again," Harry threatened. "He can always view my memories."

Ginny acted as if she didn't care. "So if you really thought that I'd done that, then why didn't you tell him and Bones when they interviewed you?"

"If I had then you'd probably have ended up in front of the Wizengamot," Harry informed Ginny.

Ginny recalled her conversation only moments earlier when Albus had said that she was extremely lucky to escape such a fate, and that it was only Harry's plea on her behalf that had prevented him from taking it further. "That still doesn't answer my question as to why didn't you tell them."

"Don't think I did it for you," Harry wanted Ginny to be clear on that point. "I only did it for your family."

Given what Albus had said about Harry's plea, Ginny couldn't bring herself to believe that Harry didn't still care in some way for her. "You must care for me a little otherwise you wouldn't have made a plea."

"As I've just said, I did it only for your family, and most definitely not for you," Harry reiterated, as he finally realized how he truly felt about Ginny and what she had done. "In fact, you're no longer someone I want anything to do with ever again."

"But you can't really mean that," Ginny said in a desperate voice, tears starting to form in her eyes.

"But I do," Harry said in a hard voice, and he went on to qualify his reasons. "You not only forced me into a relationship I didn't want, but you also ruined my friendship with Hannah."

"I just didn't want you to go out with her," Ginny sniffled. "I made a mistake, Harry. Please can't we just forget about this? You forgave Susan."

Harry could hardly believe that Ginny was daring to compare Susan's heartfelt mistake to Ginny's own calculating actions. "Susan was deserving of my forgiveness. You're not."

"But I only did it out love," Ginny protested. "You'd have done the same thing if you'd been me."

"But I wouldn't have," Harry denied Ginny's claim, "because if I honestly loved someone as much as you claim to love me, then I'd rather see them truly happy in a relationship with someone else than living a lie." Harry went further, wanting to drive his point home. "What you did was wrong, and I hate for you for it."

Ginny reeled backwards as if she had been slapped. "But, Harry..."

Harry held up his hand. "I don't want to hear it, Ginny."

Ginny tried once more. "But..."

"NO!" Harry shouted, getting frustrated. "It's over and done, Ginny. I have nothing more to say to you, so just make sure that you keep away from me."

The realization that her friendship with Harry was beyond saving, Ginny's pleading turned into anger, and she lashed out at him. "Fine! I'll keep away from you, and you can go after whatever mealy-mouthed loser you like. You were a crap kisser anyway."

Harry gave Ginny one final look of disgust, and opened the door, repeating his final demand. "Just keep away from me."

Ginny collapsed into a weeping heap as Harry left the room and closed the door behind him. After speaking briefly with Albus, Arthur, and Amelia, Harry left and headed back to Hufflepuff.

January 2nd 1995

When Ginny's absence was noted at the return to school feast, Harry said nothing to Justin or to anyone else, and out of respect for his feelings, Harry's friends didn't harangue him.

However, once dinner was over, the twins and Ron came over to him, and, after all four of them had gone into an empty classroom and closed the door, George held out his hand. "Harry, Dad told us last night what you did for the family. I just wanted to say thank you."

"I wasn't sure if you'd still be speaking to me," Harry admitted as he shook hands with George.

"You must be mad. What you did was brilliant," Ron kept his voice low as he too shook hands. "Harry, if someone had done that to me, I'd have been mad at them. I know I wouldn't have been thinking about their family."

"Your family is the closest thing I have to one, except for Aunt Minnie, and Justin," Harry finished shaking hands with Fred. "And I didn't want to hurt them just to get back at Ginny."

"Dad's furious with her," Fred revealed. "And I don't know why but he and Mum were barely speaking when we left to come back here."

"Mum always sticks up for Ginny," George reminded Fred. "Perhaps she did it this time."

"I wouldn't have stuck up for her," Ron said snottily. "If we'd done something like this, I bet Mum would have given us a good clip around the ear."

"I doubt we'd be sitting down for a week," Fred said wryly.

Harry yawned. "Sorry, but it's been a stressful couple of days."

"I don't doubt it," Fred clapped Harry on the back. "We'd better let you head off to bed, but again, thanks."

"No problem." After shaking hands with the brothers yet again, Harry left the room, feeling happy and relieved as he headed back to Hufflepuff.

15th January 1995

Luna waited until Lucy had left the room before imparting her latest news. "I overheard Chang say that she saw Lucy with Professor Lupin in the Three Broomsticks yesterday afternoon when they had escort duty, and that they looked really cozy. Do you think that they're dating?"

"It's really none of our business," Hermione chided her friend.

"But do you think it's true?" Luna asked.

Harry shook his head. "I doubt it. Charlie wrote and told me he has asked Lucy to spend some time in Romania with him during Easter."

"So you don't think she's interested in Professor Lupin then?" Luna persisted.

"Lucy's not like that, and if she's going to be seeing Charlie, I can't see her dating Lupin," Harry responded.

"So is she going to Romania?" Hermione asked with interest.

"I haven't had a chance to ask her yet. Charlie's letter only arrived last night," Harry had intended to do so after the lesson. "But I hope so, as I'm not going at all. Susan asked me this morning if I wanted to spend all of Easter with her, so I said yes."

"Are you two getting back together?" Luna asked.

"She wants to learn some of the techniques I'm going to be taught at BritAD," Harry explained.

Hermione interrupted before Harry could continue. "Will you teach me as well?"

"You know I will," Harry promised.

"You still haven't told us if you're getting back together with her," Luna reminded Harry.

"I'm not," Harry said firmly before grinning. "Besides, she's already told me that she likes someone else."

"Do you know who it is?" Luna had been eager to find out ever since Susan had told her that she had some sort of crush on someone.

Harry grinned even more widely. "Yes, but I'm not telling. She made me promise not to."

"That's not fair," Luna pouted. "I'd tell you if I liked someone."

Hermione swung around, something in Luna's voice telling her that there was more to Luna's statement than met the eye. "Then tell us, because I think you're interested in someone, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," Luna looked down at her notebook. "I only have one problem left to do but I'm having trouble. Can you help me with this?"

"Yes, but you're avoiding my question," Hermione got up and walked over to Luna's desk. "You need to transpose these two symbols."

"Thanks," Luna dipped her head down and picked up her quill, only to have Harry snatch it out of her hand.

A smiling Harry waved the feather above Luna's head. "No, you don't. Answer Hermione's question first."

Luna played for time. "You're not telling about Susan."

"It's not my secret to tell," Harry countered. "And it's obvious you like someone. Now who could it be?"

Hermione thought back to the start of the conversation, and Luna's persistence in trying to find out if Lucy and Remus were dating. "Please don't tell me it's Professor Lupin."

"What makes you think it's him?" Luna gave away her true feelings as she blushed when she answered.

Something Hermione latched onto. "Because you're blushing, Luna. You do like him, don't you?"

"Of course I like him," Luna tried to bluff her way out of the situation. "Everyone does. He's so nice that he's hard not to like."

"That's true," Hermione admitted, before she went on. "But I think you more than like him, and that's why you're blushing."

"I'm blushing because it's warm in here," Luna blustered.

"Lunnnaaa..." Hermione dragged her friend's name out. "I tell you everything."

"Okay," Luna gave in. "I do like him."

"Don't you think he's a little old for you?" Hermione pointed out the age difference. "He has to be at least forty."

"What makes you say that?" Luna asked with interest.

"He knows Professor Snape, and he looks really old," Hermione reasoned.

"I'll have you know that Professor Lupin is only 34," Luna declared in a know-it-all kind of voice reminiscent of Hermione's.

"You liked Lupin enough to look up his age?" Harry asked in shock.

"Uh uh. He gives me goosebumps," Luna sighed dreamily. "And he has the most beautiful eyes."

"Luna, you do realize that he's never going to consider you in a romantic light, don't you?" Hermione didn't want her friend mooning after someone so unrealistic.

"I know," Luna answered in a mournful tone, "but he really does have the most beautiful eyes."

Hermione didn't get it. "Personally I don't see what's so beautiful about them. They're just brown eyes."

"No, they're not," Luna came back. "They're the most vivid shade of amber I've ever seen."

"I think you'll find you're wrong," Hermione came back. "I noticed that they were light brown that day when Professor Lupin carried Harry to the hospital wing after we found Harry in the Chamber – I was only standing two feet away from him."

Harry thought back. "Hermione's right."

Luna was puzzled. "But his eyes were definitely amber yesterday."

A memory about something she had read tickled Hermione's thought processes, and she immediately turned to her pile of books and began to leaf through one, before her face fell. "Oh no."

"What is it?" Luna moved to stand by her friend.

"Take a look at page 46," Hermione pushed the book towards Luna, and Harry, who'd come to stand by his blonde friend.

Luna read the page before turning to Hermione. "You can't be serious."

"I think Professor Lupin is a werewolf," Hermione said adamantly. "I have to tell Professor Dumbledore."

"Hermione, don't you think he already knows if he is?" Harry asked logically.

"But what if he doesn't?" Hermione began to wring her hands. "And what about Lucy? She's been walking to Hogsmeade with him."

"Hermione, he's been really nice to all the students," Luna reminded Hermione. "And he's never done anything to hurt anyone. He's even given up some of his spare time to help us out with Runes and Arithmancy, something he's not paid for."

"But what about if he's another Lockhart, and he's helping us to get to Harry?" Hermione pointed out a possible reason for Remus' kindness.

"Well, seeing as I'm not as sold on Professor Lupin as Luna, I doubt he's going to get very far," Harry remarked. "And I'm rarely alone – I think you're all afraid I'm going to disappear."

"You can't blame us," Hermione was guilty of always wanted to know where Harry was. "But if Professor Lupin is after you none of us are going to be able to defend against a teacher who teaches Defense."

"Hermione, I think you're being unfair. Professor Dumbledore must trust him to let him near Harry, and I can tell he's a good person," Luna defended Remus. "And even if he is a werewolf, it's not his fault, and it's only for one night of the month."

"I know how to find out," Hermione declared. "Isn't it a full moon tonight?"

"Hermione, you can't go looking for trouble," Harry decided to stop his friend going off on some crazy werewolf hunt before she started.

"I'm just going to see if he leaves the school," Hermione told Harry.

"You can't go out there after dark," Luna joined Harry in his attempts to dissuade Hermione from doing something stupid. "What if Lestrage or Black is out there?"

In her excitement, Hermione hadn't thought about them. "I forgot about them but there are Aurors."

"They won't be able to save you from the killing curse if one of them attacks you before Aurors can reach you," Harry pointed out.

Hermione sagged visibly at Harry's excellent point. "I won't go then, but I'm still worried that Professor Lupin might be after you."

"Do you want me to talk to Aunt Minnie?" Harry offered. "And find out if you're right? She's bound to know."

"No," Hermione immediately shook her head. "I'd be embarrassed if I was wrong."

"Then let's drop the subject," Harry suggested. "We can keep an eye on Professor Lupin, and if he does something werewolfy, then we can report him."

"Werewolfy?" Luna sniggered. "You don't think he's suddenly going to howl in the middle of class do you?"

Harry went red. "No, but you know what I mean."

"I suppose," Luna giggled at Harry's annoyed face. "You'll be joining your class again in two weeks' time, so you can check yourself." She gave a small howl to tease Harry. "Or perhaps you'll find him in tucked up in Justin's bed one day, like Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother." Luna giggled again, having been introduced to the wizarding fairy tale as a child. "Oh Justin, what big teeth you have."

"Oh shut up," Harry snapped and threw Luna's quill back at her.

Luna's face immediately fell. "Sorry."

Harry shook his head in dismay. "You don't have to apologize. It's the second time I've snapped at you today when you were only teasing. I'm the one who's sorry."

"It's okay," Luna smiled at Harry. She knew what was wrong though as Harry had been on edge ever since the Ginny debacle. "I know you're worried about Ginny coming back on Saturday."

"I almost wish I'd asked for them to expel her, or that I'd just let her go into Slytherin," Harry wasn't sure how he felt about Ginny finally returning to school, he just knew he didn't want her around. "I wouldn't have to be reminded of what an idiot I was if she was somewhere else."

"Only we know about it," Hermione reminded him. "Everyone else seems to think that Snape had something to do with her suspension."

"I suppose," Harry slumped into his seat. "It's daft but the thought of being under the same roof as her really gives me the creeps."

"We'll protect you," Luna unceremoniously jumped into Harry's lap and gave him a big hug.

Harry put his arms around Luna, and gave her a grateful smile. "I don't know how you put up with me. And I certainly don't know what I'd do without a friend like you."

Hermione felt a little put out. "What about me?"

"I'd hug you too but George might not like it," Harry reminded Hermione of her boyfriend's attitude in the cavern.

"You're my friend, and I'll hug you if I want to," Hermione hated the thought that any one person could tell her what to do, and she nudged Luna over, and joined in what had become a three-way hug, having no idea that George was on his way to find her.

A smiling George opened the door to find his girlfriend and Luna wrapped in Harry's arms, and sitting on his lap, and his smile dissipated. Despite Hermione's assurance that nothing was going on between him and Harry, he was still irked at the sight, and he was therefore rather short with her. "Hermione, you were supposed to be meeting me in the library ten minutes ago."

A little annoyed at George's tone, Hermione released Harry, and ignoring her boyfriend, she deliberately kissed Harry's cheek. "If you ever want to talk, then you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry glanced over at George, and nodded at him. "George."

"Harry," George responded just as politely, and then he picked up Hermione's book bag. "Let's go."

Hermione hesitated at the door. "I'll see you both at dinner." She then hurried after her boyfriend.

When Lucy came in moments later she discovered Luna still sitting on Harry's lap. "Are congratulations in order?"

Luna shook her head. "Harry's lovely but he's not meant for me." Then, just as Hermione had done, she kissed Harry's cheek. "I'm going to take my books back to my room. I'll see you later."

Once Luna had left, Lucy questioned Harry. "So what was going on?"

Harry explained what had happened. "I think I've annoyed George again."

"From how Hermione acted, I'd say she's more than capable of dealing with George," Lucy allayed Harry's fears.

Harry smiled as he thought about his friend. "You're probably right. I wouldn't want to get her on bad side." He then went on. "I thought you were supposed to be seeing Aunt Minnie."

"She was busy, and I remembered something I was supposed to have told you," Lucy smiled. "And so I hurried back here, hoping to catch you before you left to give you some good news. You're going to be rejoining Professor Lupin's class next Thursday."

"Thursday?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Yes," Lucy nodded. "I spent some time with him on Sunday going over your progress, and in the space of two weeks you've made quite a leap forward, at least in Defense, so he's agreed to take you back two weeks earlier than planned."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry was only half-enthusiastic, as deep down, he still thought that Professor Lupin still might turn out to be a sycophantic idiot just like Lockhart.

Next Chapter: A lesson with Remus; Harry rekindles an old friendship; Hermione's relationship with George deteriorates further; Tom's plans are about to come to fruition.

Chapter 39: Boggarts, Blunders, and Broomsticks

January 19th 1995

Harry headed for what was to be his first lesson with Remus. "I hope that Professor Dumbledore is right about Lupin."

"He is," Justin reassured Harry. "You'll see."

Harry took a seat next to Hermione, as Justin was sitting sandwiched between Susan and Hannah, and began to take out his books.

At the front of the classroom, Remus waited for the remainder of the class to come in and settle down before starting the lesson. "Let's begin by putting away your books. Today is going to be our first practical lesson."

Harry couldn't help but feel excited that he hadn't missed the first practical lesson; at the moment his life felt like one long line of theoretical lessons as he tried to catch up. He put up his hand, and responded when invited to do so. "Will we be having many practical lessons?"

"I have currently included at least two per month in my curriculum," Remus revealed, and he could see from the faces of the students that they obviously approved of this decision. "Now if you would all like to push the desks to one side, stow your bags and other personal belongings against the wall, and then stand in front of this cupboard."

The class hurried to do as instructed, some jostling going on as pupils tried to get prime position.

"Now what you are about to face is called a boggart," Remus stopped talking and tapped the tall oak cupboard that had two doors and several drawers below it. The class recoiled slightly when the cupboard began to shake. "For five points can anyone tell me what a boggart is?"

Hermione's hand shot up before most students had even registered the question, and she was therefore asked to answer. "A boggart is a shape shifter that likes to live in dark, confined spaces, and it

takes the form of the thing most feared by anyone who comes across it."

"Five points to Gryffindor," Remus smiled at Hermione's text book answer. "So all of you should be aware that whatever frightens you the most, even if you don't realize that it does, will be the form the boggart will likely take."

Harry put up his hand again. "Can it be killed?"

"It can be vanquished by the use of the Riddikulus spell," Remus answered, before going on to explain what the spell did. "You have to imagine your worst fear as something amusing and non-hostile while incanting the spell. The wand movement is like thus."

Hermione watched Remus do the movement before copying him, earning her some sniggers. Remus was reminded very much of Lily Potter, and he threw Hermione a lifeline. "If you would all like to copy Miss Granger, who has got the wand movement perfectly correct, and say the word "Riddikulus" while you do so."

Forgetting that she thought he was a werewolf and a danger to Harry, Hermione flashed her teacher a grateful smile, and began to do as he said, the class falling into line with her.

After a few minutes spent practicing, Remus decided that they were ready. "Please form a line, and we will begin."

Now that they knew what they were up against, most of the class didn't want to go first, and Seamus Finnigan found himself pushed forward. Remus smiled encouragingly at him. "Now don't forget the wand movement and the spell, and most importantly don't forget to imagine your fear as something funny."

Seamus hoped no-one could see his knees knocking as Remus opened the door of the cupboard, particularly when a white garbed woman with floor length hair swept out. He had no idea that his face turned pasty white as he realized what it was when she opened her mouth to scream.

Remus called out to him. "The spell, Mr. Finnigan."

Seamus closed his eyes against the vision of the Banshee, and imagined her as a mummy, her entire body, including her mouth, wrapped up tightly. "Riddikulus."

He opened his eyes up in time to see her fall to the floor, any chance to scream now gone. Remus winked at him. "Five points to Gryffindor. Now you, Miss Patil."

More than half of the class had tackled the boggart before it was Hannah's turn, and she braced herself, not quite sure whether she would be attacked by bats or bees, as she feared both. It turned out it was neither, as the vampire that Justin had just fitted with dentures turned into Hannah's baby brother David. But this wasn't the happy smiling boy she was used to seeing, instead it was a lifeless body lying in a coffin. Hannah didn't hear Remus' gentle encouragement over the sound of her heartbeat, and she dropped her wand and began to scream.

Next in line, Harry stepped forward, pushing Hannah to the side and taking her place. The toddler and coffin began to contort before it formed a very familiar figure, and Harry stepped back in shock as Petunia Dursley advanced on Harry and hissed, "Freak!" Like Hannah, Harry also forgot the spell he was supposed to be using, and stepped back again as Petunia moved forward. "You're nothing but a freak, boy."

Before things could escalate, Remus dashed in front of Harry, and the vile woman vanished, transforming momentarily into a silvery-white sphere. As it did so, Remus dispatched it by turning it into large lump of cheese, which fell to the ground, and was subsequently devoured by mice, before going 'pop' and vanishing completely. He then turned around to face the class. "I'm afraid that you weren't all quite as prepared as I would have liked. Please move the desks back, and re-take your seats."

Still standing in line, Hermione's blood had ran cold as she had worked out what the silvery-white sphere was, and what it meant. Shaking herself when Remus addressed the class, she mechanically did as he had asked but her mind was on what she now knew for certain. Deciding that she would talk to Luna and Harry again about it after their next study session, she forced herself to turn her attention back to what was going on at the front of the classroom.

Remus had sat Hannah down and was currently checking on her. "Would you like to go the infirmary?"

Hannah, who was pale, but no longer crying, shook her head. "No, thank you. It was just a shock. I didn't expect to see David like that."

"David?" Remus questioned.

"My baby brother," Hannah said. "Dad is always fussing over him, particularly if he has a cold or something."

Harry frowned in puzzlement. "But your Dad's a doctor."

"I think sometimes that makes people worse, and given how many people currently have the flu, I'm not surprised Miss Abbott is so concerned," Remus fished in his pocket and pulled out a bar of chocolate, which he split into two and offered to the two children. "Chocolate always makes me feel better."

Harry blanched. "I'd rather not."

Remus, like the rest of the staff, was aware of Ginny's misdemeanor, and he was therefore unoffended by Harry's refusal. "I can assure you that it's perfectly safe."

"I'm okay," Harry turned to Hannah. "You can have my half if you want it."

"No, thanks," Hannah shook her head. "I not that fond of chocolate now either."

Remus put the two halves back into his pocket, but not before snapping off a piece and eating it, just to show that there was nothing wrong with it. "More for me then. Back to your seats."

After the lesson, Hannah told Justin to go on, and she waited for Harry to come out. "Can I talk to you?"

"Wait until everyone's gone," Harry said, and he then told Hermione he would see her later when she attempted to talk to him.

The two of them waited until they were the only two remaining in the corridor, before any of them said anything, Harry asking, "What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to thank you for what you did in the lesson," Hannah said, before leaning forward and kissing Harry's cheek. "And I'd like for us to be friends again."

Even though Hannah had accompanied Justin to Hogwarts to see Harry when he had first been found, things between the two of them were still more than a little strained, and Harry was grateful for the olive branch. "I'd like that as well, and I also want to apologize again. I know that you think I was messing you around, but I truly wasn't."

"When I found out that you were dating Ginny when I was revived, I was really upset," Hannah answered honestly. "But I know now that it wasn't your fault." She hesitated before asking, "Harry, did you like her even a little?"

"Yes, but only as a friend," Harry was also completely truthful with his reply. "Given that I was so adamant about it, I should have known something wasn't right but whenever I saw her, I couldn't think about anything except being with her."

"I know Justin felt as though he was to blame," Hannah had spoken to her boyfriend after the truth had been discovered. "That he should have seen what was going on."

"It wasn't Justin's fault," Harry had told his friend this several times already. He smiled a little ruefully. "And I think we're all blaming ourselves when really there's only one person to blame."

"Ginny, you mean?" Hannah asked, even though she had already guessed what Harry was going to say.

"Exactly," Harry nodded his head.

"I think you're right," Hannah gave Harry a quick hug. "I'm glad that we can be friends again."

Harry was too. "So am I, but if we want to stay that way, we'd better head for dinner before Justin wonders what I've done with you."

Hannah giggled. "He knows he has nothing to worry about."

Harry was glad that she felt that way. "Hannah, even though I did like you, I think that what's happened was actually for the best. You and Justin seem perfect together."

"He's wonderful," Hannah sighed as she thought about her boyfriend. "And I suppose in some respects I'd never have known if Ginny hadn't done what she had."

"It's probably the only good thing to come out of this whole mess," Harry remarked as they turned the corner.

Hannah was a little curious as to Harry's thoughts on what had happened. "Doesn't it bother you that no-one knows why she is suspended, and has had the scholarship taken off her?"

"A little," Harry responded after a moment's silence. "But could you imagine Malfoy if he knew the truth? I'd never hear the end of it, and it wouldn't be pleasant for the rest of Ginny's family."

"You're far too nice," Hannah decided.

Harry didn't think so. "Not really. I was glad when I found out that Lockhart had died. That hardly makes me nice."

"Harry, he tried to kill you, me, and our friends," Hannah reminded Harry. "I'm glad he's dead, but I don't think that makes me horrible."

"You're not," Harry hurried to answer, and he stopped walking when he realized that they reached the entrance to the Great Hall. "Hannah, before we go in, I just want to say thanks again for giving me another chance."

"You gave me one, so I think we're even," Hannah smiled brightly, and went to walk into the Hall, only for Harry to stop her. "What is it?"

Harry still had one thing he needed to bring up. "I don't think that's exactly true about us being even. According to Professor Lupin I owe you a life debt for helping to locate the Chamber. If you hadn't, I might have still been down there."

"Then I'll truly consider us even if you help me with my defense homework tonight," Hannah announced after a few moments' thought.

"You're swapping a life debt for help with defense homework even though I've only just rejoined the class?" Harry asked incredulously, a little surprised to get off so easily - Colin Creevey had demanded Harry pose for pictures with him, and go into Hogsmeade with him to have lunch together, both of which Harry had had to reluctantly agree to. Harry had been more than relieved when he had fulfilled his part of the deal.

"I find it difficult and you're good at it, so yes," Hannah answered, before slipping her arm through Harry's and gently tugging him into the Great Hall.

27th January 1995

From her seat next to Meredith, Ginny had to look away when Harry walked into the Great Hall. These were generally the only times she saw him, as she did her best to avoid him in the common room, and he never went into the library when she was there. When she had returned to school a week ago, she had told Meredith what she had done, and her friend had been a little shocked and disgusted, but it was mostly because she had been unable to see what was so special about Harry.

Ginny turned to Meredith, just wanting to get out of the Great Hall. "It's after five. I need to get my books and head to the library."

Meredith had barely started her meal, and she protested accordingly. "But I still haven't finished dinner, and I wanted some help on the potions homework." Meredith had been the only person to take up Ginny's offer of extra tuition that Harry had forced her to make.

"I don't have a lot of choice in the matter if I want to get some library time in. We can go over the potions homework in Hufflepuff," Ginny offered, and then she put down her napkin and headed out of the Great Hall. A few moments later she was surprised to hear Severus calling out her name, and she turned back. "Sir?"

"Come with me," Severus ordered before leading the way to the seventh floor, and into a once familiar room. "Well, come in."

Ginny walked in to find the room had the usual sofa and fire set up in it. "Am I in trouble?"

"Not with me," Severus indicated that Ginny should sit down. "In fact I have a proposition for you."

Unlike the very first time Severus had said this, this time Ginny didn't huddle into herself, and instead she leant forward. "What is it?"

"I am willing to continue your potions mentorship," Severus could see that his announcement had come as a shock.

"But the Ministry are refusing to pay for the scholarship," Ginny unnecessarily reminded Severus.

"I have spoken to the Headmaster, and he has agreed that if it is done in your own time, then there is no reason why the scholarship shouldn't go ahead, but with private funding," Severus watched a frown cross Ginny's face. "What is it?"

"My parents can't afford that sort of thing," Ginny pointed out. "And I doubt Dad would pay for it even if he could. He still wasn't speaking to me when I left for school."

"I have also spoken to your father, who, after a little persuasion, has agreed that you should be able to continue the scholarship," Severus had merely pointed out that it would be criminal for Ginny's talent to go to waste, and that it would cost the Weasleys nothing, as he, Severus, would be willing to pay for the scholarship himself. Arthur had been torn, but Molly had begged him, and with things only just back to normal between him and his wife, Arthur had caved and agreed to Severus' request but only on one condition. "However, he did have a stipulation."

"Dad's going to pay for it?" Ginny asked in stunned amazement.

"No, a private sponsor is," Severus revealed the truth to Ginny. "But he wishes to remain anonymous, so as far as your father is concerned I am paying for the scholarship."

"So what is the stipulation?" Ginny returned to Severus' earlier comment.

"If you get into any form of trouble again, then he will not sanction your continuing on the program," Severus laid out what Arthur had stipulated. "But we both know that that isn't going to happen, is it, Ginny?"

"No, Sir," Ginny immediately reassured Severus. "I'm avoiding Harry whenever possible."

"Keep it that way," Severus warned. "Now, do you have any questions?"

"Will you tell me who the sponsor is?" Ginny asked, wanting to know who had agreed to continue to fund her education.

"As I've just said, he wishes to remain anonymous for the moment, but you will get to meet him eventually," Severus had agreed with Tom that Ginny wasn't ready yet to learn his true identity. "So do you wish to continue?"

"Of course," Ginny nodded enthusiastically before asking something that had been worrying her. "But what about access to the library? I'll need more time than I'm getting at the moment."

"You only have to imagine a book and it will appear here, in case you've forgotten," Severus reminded her of the room's potential, before going on. "Have you been practicing your spells while at home?"

"Yes," Ginny had been doing so in the field outside of the Burrow whenever she had been able to sneak out. "But I didn't get in as much practice as I wanted to. And without you or more books, I haven't been able to learn anything new."

Severus immediately thought about what he wanted, and the room changed into a library and potions laboratory. "In that case, there is no time like the present, so I think we should get started...."

February 12th 1995

Harry stretched and winced. "You really know how to make people work hard, don't you?"

"I'm the Captain," Justin smirked at Harry. "And it's my job."

"Slave driver," Harry smiled before he became serious. "Justin, I feel a little uncomfortable taking your place."

"Harry, you know as well as I do that you're best suited to the seeker's spot, and someone had to take Ginny's place on the team. And besides, I'm still the Captain and a chaser, so I'm not too upset about it," Justin didn't care what position he played in as long as their team won. "Come on, be honest. You love it, don't you?"

"Yes, but still I hardly think that it's fair, particularly as the matches have had to be rearranged," Harry protested. Justin had persuaded Harry to rejoin the team, and so the remaining matches had been rearranged so that Harry could get in some practice and also catch up with his schoolwork, something most teams had been happy about, all except for Slytherin. But they had been overruled by the majority, and so the next match of the season was to be Gryffindor against Ravenclaw rather than Gryffindor against Hufflepuff, but that hadn't stopped Justin from pushing his team during practice.

"Harry, it's all been decided so just shut up," Justin then glanced down as he felt something under his foot. Bending down he lifted it up. "I think someone's dropped their homework."

"Strangely shaped homework," Harry watched as Justin opened the rather large piece of parchment up. "It looks like a map."

Looking closely at the parchment, both boys watched in amazement as the name 'Colin Creevey' came closer to the spot where their own names were printed. Harry rolled his eyes. "We'd better go. I don't want to pose with him for any more pictures."

Justin couldn't hide his smile. "You really hated that, didn't you?"

"You know I loathe having my picture taken," Harry snatched the map out of Justin's hands. "And Colin got more than his money's worth out of me."

"So you won't be going to lunch with him again?" Justin couldn't resist asking.

"Hardly! If he had sat any closer to me, he would have been on my lap," Harry reminded Justin of the nightmarish lunch he had shared with Colin. Justin had been sitting two tables away from Harry and Colin, unable to resist the temptation of watching his friend suffer.

Justin barked out a laugh. "It was funny."

"Not from where I wasn't sitting, it wasn't," Harry snapped, and he looked back down at the map. "Come on, he's just around the corner."

Focused on Colin, neither boy noticed George's name as he came down the stairway, fruitlessly searching for the map, having realized he'd dropped it on his way to the kitchen for supplies. As he searched, he continually murmured, "Fred is going to kill me. Fred is really going to kill me."

Once the two boys reached the safety of their dormitory, Justin took the map from Harry and slipped it into his side table drawer. "I need to take a shower, and you certainly do. We can look at this when we're finished."

Both boys hurried through their showers, each more than interested at looking at the map. As soon as they re-entered the bedroom, Justin got it out, and began to look at it in more detail. "This is brilliant. It's showing us where everyone is."

Harry could see everyone he knew. "Luna's with Hermione in the library, and Aunt Minnie is in her classroom with Malfoy."

Both boys sniggered at this comment, Draco having incurred a detention when he had gotten into an argument with Harry over the unfairness of having the remaining quidditch matches rearranged to suit Harry. Minerva, having come close to losing Harry, had been a little unfair in assigning a detention to Draco, particularly as this time Harry had been the one to goad Draco.

"I can even see the Headmaster," Harry exclaimed in amazement. "Who do you suppose this belongs to?"

"I don't know," Justin, who hadn't been there when George had revealed the map to the girls in the bathroom, had no idea that it belonged to the Weasley twins. He turned the map over. "Well, if what it says on here is true, then the map belongs to Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, whoever they may be."

"Odd names," Harry murmured before he continued reading "...purveyors of aids to magical mischief-makers, are proud to present the Marauders Map."

"At least we know what this is now," Justin grinned at Harry. "Whoever made this obviously did it for fun."

"But it still doesn't tell us who the makers are," Harry folded up the map, unaware that it could be deactivated. "Do you want to tell the others about this or keep it to ourselves?"

"Until we find out who it belongs to, I think we should keep it to ourselves," Justin decided, before grinning widely at Harry. "And maybe even have a little fun."

Harry grinned back, and the matter was settled. But it would be some time before they got to use the map, or even discovered who it truly belonged to.

February 18th 1995

Harry pointed to the rune on the last page. "I can't get this right. It looks like Ehwaz but I know it's not."

"It's Mannaz," bending over Harry, Hermione identified the similar rune. She stepped backwards when the rat on Harry's shoulder rose up. "Did you have to bring Scabbers to study?"

"Ron's playing in a match in case you've forgotten," Harry reminded Hermione of where the rat's master was.

"He could have left Scabbers in his bedroom," Hermione gave the rat another look of distaste.

"He's a little worried that Scabbers might be a tad off color," Harry had readily agreed to take the rat with him as he only had one piece of work on runes to do, and he had eschewed watching the match in favor of picking Hermione's brains, as she had decided it was too cold to watch a game she fully expected Gryffindor to win anyway.

"I'd say he's more than a little off color; he looks about ready to be put down," Hermione gave a shudder as she looked at the rat, which had lost weight, had big patches of skin showing through where fur had dropped out, and kept scratching itself.

"Ron would be heartbroken if that happened," Harry lifted the rat off his shoulder and placed it on the desk. As he did so, he noticed Nagini staring hungrily at it. "Don't even think about it."

"But I'm hungry," Nagini complained.

Hermione wasn't bothered by Harry's speaking Parseltongue, but she frowned nevertheless. "And why did you bring Nagini to a study session? She's most definitely not ill."

Harry looked a little sheepish. "She complained that I was letting Hedwig come with me."

Hedwig gave a rare hoot at the sound of her name. Since she had been reunited with Harry, just like Justin, she had spent most of her time at his side, eschewing the owlery in favor of staying with her master.

Harry then made a good point. "Anyway, you've got Crookshanks."

"He keeps scratching the other girls' beds," Hermione picked up the ugly cat and scratched behind his ears. "He gets bored on his own."

"Fine but just keep him away from Scabbers," Harry warned. "He's already tried to have a go at him."

"This would be far easier if Susan and Luna had agreed to study with us; they could have done a little animal sitting themselves," Hermione placed Crookshanks back in his basket. "Be a good Crookshanks."

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes as Hermione tenderly tucked the cat up with a blanket. "Susan wanted to see the match, and Luna wants to make eyes at Professor Lupin."

"Better him than Lockhart," Hermione shared a smile with Harry. Having talked over her fears with him and Luna, they had all come to the conclusion that as long Professor Lupin didn't do anything 'werewolfy', then all three of them would just let things lie. Not that Luna had shared Hermione's worries: mainly because she had a massive crush on Remus but also because, as she quite correctly had told her two friends, it wasn't Remus' fault that he was a werewolf.

"Too true," Harry had warmed a little towards more his Defense teacher, especially as he seemed more than capable, but he wasn't as thrilled by him as Luna. Aware he should get on with his work, he looked back down at the page and sighed, "I still can't work this out even knowing that this is Mannaz."

Hermione moved forward once more, and as she reached out to point to a symbol that Harry should have been transposing, she accidentally knocked Scabbers, who had been perched near the end of the table, onto the floor. "Drat."

It was too much of a temptation for Nagini and Crookshanks, Nagini slithering off the table just as Crookshanks shook free of her blanket. Almost as one the pair shot forward in a race to reach their prize, a very frightened Scabbers.

Harry span around in his chair as the rat bolted across the floor, and yelled at Hermione, "Grab Crookshanks."

Hermione dove forward at the same time as Harry, both trying to get to Scabbers, and the pair of them ended up on the floor, their heads smacking sharply together. Unfortunately their mishap meant that they were both too late to save Scabbers, and it was Nagini who won the race between the two animals, Hermione managing to grab Crookshanks by his tail. Free of interference, Nagini reared up and sank her fangs into the rat.

Despite the fact that he was probably too late, Harry still hissed out a loud "NO!", hoping to save Scabbers from his mealtime fate. "Nagini, drop him."

Still a little annoyed that Harry had been neglecting her, and that he had killed the Basilisk, a snake she considered to be the king of snakes and thus revered, Nagini deliberately ignored Harry, and unhinging her jaw, she began to swallow the rat whole.

On the floor, Hermione let go of Crookshanks, who slowly sauntered back to his basket, and she then closed her eyes and lay back on the floor. "Now how is Ron going to feel about the condition of his rat?"

Harry dropped his head onto the floor as well. "Pissed at me, I think. I should never have let Nagini out of her cage."

"You couldn't have known she'd disobey you," Hermione lifted her head and tentatively opened one eye. "Yuk."

Harry looked over at Nagini where the back end of the rat was slowly disappearing down her throat, and he wagged his finger at her. "You are not being allowed out again anytime soon."

Nagini couldn't answer, her mouth full, but if she could have laughed she would have. She had what she wanted, and she would worry about Harry's warning later. Harry groaned as he lay back down. "I'm not looking forward to telling Ron."

"I'll tell him with you," Hermione offered. "And then I had better go to see Madam Pomfrey." Hermione touched her sore head. "You have one solid skull."

Even though his own head felt fine, Harry realized he must have hurt Hermione, so he rolled over, and leant over her to check the damage. "Let me take a look." Harry then gently parted Hermione's hair, his fingers softly brushing over the bright red lump that was already forming. "You've got quite a beauty."

A gasp interrupted their conversation, and both of them looked around to see a flash of red hair and a quidditch cape vanishing out of the door. Quickly working out who it had to have been, Harry gave yet another groan. "Just what I needed on top of this: an angry boyfriend. I think that was George."

"So do I," Hermione rolled onto her feet. "Come on, we've got work to finish."

Harry was a little confused as he too got up. "Aren't you going after him?"

"No," Hermione refused. She and George had already had one argument about what he considered to be her overly 'feely' friendship with Harry, and she wasn't about to pander to him. "If he wants to act stupidly then that's up to him."

"But you know what he must have thought," Harry knew what he would have thought if he had walked in to find the two of them lying on the floor together, with Harry leaning over Hermione as he had been.

"Yes, but I also know that he should trust me, but his actions tell me otherwise, so he can go and sulk if he wants to but I'm not going after him," a hurt Hermione pointed to the textbook. "We're going to finish our homework."

"Harry, we won," an excited voice interrupted them.

"That's great, Ron," Harry turned around to find Ron, Neville, Susan, and Luna standing there. "But I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"Are you alright?" Luna immediately noticed Hermione's lump on her head.

"Not exactly," Hermione shook her head, and winced. "I got this trying to stop Crookshanks going after Scabbers."

Ron looked around the room. "Where is Scabbers?"

"I'm afraid Nagini ate him," Harry said hesitantly. "I'm so sorry."

"How could this have happened?" Ron asked as he slumped into a chair.

Hermione and Harry told Ron the full story, with both of them taking the blame. "We both tried to save him, but it was too late. We'll get you another rat."

Ron shook his head. "Don't bother. He was old anyway." His face crumpled slightly. "Excuse me. I really need to be alone."

Neville followed him out together with Susan, but Luna stayed behind to make a suggestion. "I don't think you should get Ron a rat. He's always wanted an owl."

"How do you know that?" Hermione asked, as she sat down.

"He was moaning about how Scabbers was really useless on the way down to the quidditch pitch," Luna told them. "And that he wished he had an owl."

"He didn't look as though he thought Scabbers was useless just then," Hermione observed. "He was really upset."

Harry decided that his best option would be to simply go out and buy an owl, rather than asking Ron if he wanted one. "I'll ask Aunt Minnie for a catalogue."

"Let's go now," Luna grabbed Harry's hand.

"But I still haven't finished studying," Harry protested.

"Then I'll go on my own," Luna let go of Harry's hand, and opened the door. "See you both in a bit."

Harry turned back to face his desk, but his concentration wasn't on his work, and so he swiveled around to face Hermione. "Hermione, are you really not going after George?"

"No, I'm not," Hermione was still furious with her boyfriend. "In fact, I don't know if I'll ever go after him again."

Harry's stomach lurched but he put it down to concern for what he felt he had done, and he tried to get his friend to see the situation from George's point of view. "Hermione, I would have thought the same if I'd been him."

Hermione span around in her seat. "Would you have stormed off without finding out what was going on?"

Harry slowly shook his head. "Probably not."

"Then I rest my case," Hermione turned back to her work. "Now I really must get on. I want to get this done before dinner."

Suspecting that Hermione was not going to change her mind, Harry did the same.

Later that evening

Ron sat down dejectedly at the table. Fred thought his brother looked almost as bad as George. "What's wrong with you? You look almost worse than George."

"George?" Ron only then noticed that his brother was missing.

"He caught Harry and Hermione rolling around on the floor together," Fred couldn't resist telling Ron.

"So?" Ron shrugged.

"They had obviously been kissing again," Fred had been filled in by George as to the Chamber incident. "And George heard Harry saying something about Hermione being a beauty."

"Hermione and Harry were on the floor because they were trying to save Scabbers," Ron said scathingly.

"So why the talk about being a beauty?" Fred challenged.

"I don't know why Harry would have said that," Ron admitted, before going on. "But I doubt he and Hermione were kissing at all. Hermione got hurt when she and Harry hit heads, which allowed Nagini enough time to eat Scabbers." Ron could see that Fred was still somewhat skeptical. "Take a look at Hermione – she's sporting a rather large bump on her forehead. She obviously hasn't gone to Madam Pomfrey yet to get it dealt with."

Fred turned around and noted that just as Ron had said, Hermione had a big lump on her forehead, which was visible through her fringe. It was then that he figured out what Harry had probably said. "I think

Harry must have said something about that lump being a beauty, and not that Hermione was. I'd better go and tell George, and take him something to eat."

Sulking in his dormitory, George listened patiently to what Fred had to say, before disparaging Fred's story. "You can't honestly expect me to believe he was talking about a lump."

"Did you stop to ask Hermione what was going on?" Fred countered.

"No," George answered a little snottily. "It was obvious."

"After what Ron has told me, I don't think it was," Fred quite correctly said. "And I know I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when you apologize."

"Who says I'm going to apologize?" George asked stubbornly.

"Because you know you're wrong," Fred grinned. "I'm going back to dinner. There's some chicken and chips for you under that plate."

Fred was proved right as later that night George apologized to Hermione, who, still not having been to Madam Pomfrey, and having a thumping headache, refused it. "I don't want your apology, George. You didn't trust me."

"But you would have thought the same," George argued.

"No, I wouldn't," Hermione got up. "I would have stayed to find out what was going on. I'm going to bed."

"So what about Hogsmeade tomorrow?" George asked in a sad voice.

"I'm going with Harry and Luna," Hermione knew it would irk George, but she didn't care. Ignoring his hurt face, she picked up her books. "Goodnight, George."

It took George two days of groveling to get Hermione to finally forgive him. "I promise this will never happen again."

"If it does, then it's over," Hermione warned. "A relationship has to be built on trust, and if you don't trust Harry, then you should at least trust me. And you didn't, George."

"I swear it won't happen again," George pulled Hermione towards to kiss her. "I promise."

George had no idea that he was going to break that promise, and sooner than he thought.

February 19th 1995

Harry glanced across the field at a yell and flew over. "What brings you two down here?"

"George is closeted with Fred and Lee – I think they're inventing more tricks," Hermione's face showed how little she approved of what she believed they were doing.

"And so why haven't you got your head buried in the books?" Harry teased.

"She's got closet fever," Luna piped up.

"That's cabin fever," Hermione corrected her friend. "I just realized that if I looked at another book today, I was going to scream."

Lucy, Justin, and Hannah, who had accompanied Harry, flew down to see what was going on. Lucy felt rather envious of how snug Hermione and Luna both looked. "You girls look nice and warm."

Harry smiled gratefully at Lucy. "I know it was a bit much asking you to supervise a bit of fun rather than training when it's this cold, but I was feeling a little bit like Hermione."

"It's not that bad," Lucy assured him, and she patted Harry's broomstick, Harry again having appropriated her Firebolt. "Now you're down here, Hermione, would you care to come for a ride?"

Hermione stepped back nervously. "I don't think so. I'm not that fond of flying."

Hannah had felt the same way until Justin had talked her into getting on a broomstick with him. "Come on, just give it a go."

"I'll ride with you if Hermione doesn't want to," Luna loved flying, and letting someone else do the hard work meant that she could just simply sit and watch the world go by.

Harry gave a playful pout as Luna climbed up behind Lucy. "Come on, Hermione. You don't want me to be the only one alone, do you?"

"I doubt you care on that Firebolt," Hermione retorted, knowing only too well how much Harry loved riding the broomstick.

"Come on," Harry continued to cajole her. "How often is it that a girl gets to fly with the Boy Who Lived, and on a Firebolt?"

Lucy snorted. "Don't forget whose Firebolt that is, Mr. Boy Who Lived!"

Harry grinned at Lucy. "It's mine until you catch me."

Hermione laughed at the interplay. "You're never going to get it back from him."

"Tell me something I don't know," Lucy turned around to address Luna. "Hold on tight. I might not have a Firebolt at the moment but this Nimbus is still pretty quick."

"Go as fast you want," Luna urged, and she gave a delighted squeal as they took off.

Justin made sure Hannah was securely behind him, and he called out as he too lifted up from the ground. "Come on, Hermione. Have a little fun."

Harry held out his hand. "I promise I won't go fast, and if you don't like it, I'll land."

Hermione glanced up at her laughing friends, and she underwent a moment of wanting to belong; she therefore stepped forward. "You promise?"

"I promise," Harry shuffled forward slightly. "I'll take it nice and slow."

Hermione climbed on behind Harry and wrapped her arms around him. Up until now she had always refused both Harry's and George's offers to take her flying but seeing the other girls having a good time was making her wonder if she was missing out. "I'm ready."

"Here we go," Harry expertly maneuvered the broomstick off the ground, and not getting above a few feet, he completed a lap of the quidditch field. "Are you okay?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm okay. You can try a little higher if you want."

Harry didn't need urging to do so, and took the broomstick up until they were about fifteen feet above the ground. After two more circuits, Harry made a suggestion. "How about a little quicker?"

"Just a little," Hermione was feeling a little more secure now that they had done a few laps.

Harry pushed the broomstick just a little bit more, and after doing three more circuits, he was urged to go even higher.

Behind Harry, Hermione had begun to relax, and to look around her. "I can see into the tree tops over there. I wonder what might be in them."

"We can't fly over them," Harry reminded Hermione of the limitations that had currently been set for them. "But we can fly over the lake if you want to try it."

Hermione craned her neck to see the lake, and spotted the silvery water in the distance. "Let's do it."

Harry went a little faster and soon they were bobbing just above the water. "Look down."

Clutching more tightly to Harry, Hermione did as he suggested, and she gave a small cry of delight. "I can see fish."

"Sometimes you can see the squid," Harry banked slightly towards the school. "Hold on, I'm going to go higher and faster now."

Hermione gave a small squeal as she finally experienced the feeling of acceleration. She also held more tightly to Harry, pressing herself more firmly into his back. "This is brilliant."

Hearing Hermione's delighted comment, Harry turned around to see that Hermione's eyes were shining, and he was struck with the realization that he wanted nothing more at that moment than to kiss her. Snapping his head back to the front, he spoke softly to himself. "Idiot."

"What?" Hermione yelled over the noise of the rushing wind, which seemed to be getting louder. "I can't hear you."

"Nothing," Harry turned around again to look at Hermione. This time, however, he wasn't hit with the same inclination, and he decided that his previous impulse was merely the exhilaration of seeing someone else enjoying the Firebolt as much as he was. He therefore began another circuit of the lake, going even faster, and making Hermione clasp him even tighter.

It was only when they were halfway across the lake that Harry realized, even through all the warm winter clothing they were wearing, that he could feel Hermione's breasts against his back. But that wasn't his biggest problem: his biggest problem was that the feeling was something he was enjoying a little too much, and his body was beginning to react to Hermione's closeness. He therefore called out abruptly, "I think that's enough."

Hermione was rather surprised at Harry's curt yell, and rather disappointed. "Can't we go round just one more time?"

"It's too cold," Harry lied, now wanting nothing more than to put some space between him and Hermione, something that riding on a broomstick was making difficult. "I'll drop you back down at the field."

A concerned Lucy flew over when she saw Harry landing. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm just a little cold," Harry found himself lying again as he held out her broomstick. "Here."

Luna slipped off from behind Lucy as Lucy touched down. "I could do with a warm drink myself."

"Let's all go back to my rooms for hot chocolate," Lucy suggested, an offer that was quickly taken up by all of the children there.

For Harry the hour the group spent with Lucy seemed to stretch on forever, and as soon as Luna said she had to go wash up for dinner, he also jumped up and said he did too.

When they reached their dormitory, Justin dropped onto his bed. "So what was up with you? You hardly said a word the entire time we were in Lucy's rooms."

"Nothing is up," Harry was short with his friend but he couldn't help it.

"Harry, don't forget who you're talking to," Justin said softly. "I know something's wrong."

"You're as bad as Charlie," Harry grumbled.

"Which also means that I'm right," Justin sat up. "What is it?"

Harry dropped his face into his hands, and mumbled, "I think I like Hermione again."

Justin's face reflected his surprise. "I thought you'd gotten past that."

"So did I," Harry rubbed a hand over his face as he looked up. "But today when she was on the broomstick with me, I kind of, you know, liked it a little too much."

Justin knew what Harry meant only too well, but he didn't read into it in quite the same way Harry was obviously doing. "I've had the same reaction with Hannah when she rides behind me. It's perfectly normal, Harry."

"If it had been just that, it would have been okay but it wasn't," Harry got up and began pacing. "I also wanted to kiss her. She was looking at me with her hair flying behind her, and her eyes were all sparkly, and I wanted to kiss her."

"Oh," Justin knew that that was very different.

"And then I started thinking what if I lied to George when I kissed Hermione in the Chamber?" Harry was starting to get himself worked up. "What if I really knew deep down that it was Hermione?"

"Didn't you call out Ginny's name?" Justin reminded Harry.

"Yes, but still..." Harry slumped back onto the bed. "What if I did know?"

"Do you think you did?" Justin countered.

"I don't know," Harry shook his head.

"Then I'd say you didn't," Justin decided sensibly, before questioning Harry's intentions. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," Harry immediately said. "I'd never do anything to split anyone up, particularly not after what Ginny did to me because of Hannah."

"In that case you shouldn't be so worried," Justin moved to sit by Harry, who was still looking stressed. "Look, you got a little bothered by Hermione sitting so close. But when you realized you were being affected by it, you did the decent thing by landing. You haven't done anything wrong, Harry."

Harry let out a deep breath as he absorbed what Justin had said. "I was overreacting as usual, wasn't I?"

"Just a little," Justin patted his friend on the back. "And I'm sure you'll get over Hermione, just like you did the last time. And you'll laugh about this when you find the right girl for you."

"How can you be so sure?" Harry challenged his best friend's comment.

Justin reminded Harry of what he had gone through himself. "Because I've been in the same position. I thought I fancied Cho, but then I went out with Luna, and I forgot all about liking Cho."

"But Luna wasn't the right girl for you," Harry continued to challenge his friend.

"No, but Hannah is," Justin went a little red as he admitted how he felt about his girlfriend. "I love her, and I can't imagine being with anyone else. And I just know that one day you'll have the same thing."

"I suppose you're right," Harry smiled as he nudged Justin gently in the ribs in an affectionate manner. "Thanks."

"Anytime," Justin got up, and held out his hand, pulling Harry to his feet. "Come on. We still need to wash up. After all that fresh air, I'm starving."

February 27th 1995

Sirius put down the book he had been reading when Tom came into the room. "It's been a while."

"I decided to wait until the time was right to strike, and I've decided that the time is now," Tom revealed why he hadn't been in to see Sirius since he broke his leg.

Sirius picked the book back up. "I'm not helping you."

"Oh, I think you will," Tom told him.

Sirius turned his back on Tom as a house-elf appeared with his dinner. "Forgive me if I refuse but my dinner is getting cold."

"By all means, enjoy it," Tom walked back towards the door, and made a hollow threat. "It might be the last one you get for some time."

Sirius refrained from throwing his book at the back of Tom's head, knowing it would only earn him a bout under the Cruciatus if he did. Instead, he made sure that he ate everything in front of him, not wanting to be starved as he had been on several occasions.

The Next Morning

Tom greeted Sirius brightly. "Good morning, Sirius."

"Is it?" Sirius answered belligerently, having slept poorly.

"It will be," Tom responded, his voice still chipper. "Today you are going to destroy your godson's family."

"I don't think so," Sirius refused to help as he had the previous day.

Again a house-elf appeared, this time with breakfast, and Sirius sat down at the table to eat.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" Tom asked, as Sirius ignored him and tucked into his food.

Sirius immediately became suspicious, and dropped his fork. "Why?"

"It was laced with Imperius potion," Tom grinned behind his gold mask. "And what's more, it was keyed to me."

Sirius paled at the ramifications of this statement. "You bastard!"

"I'm going to let that one go, as I need you in perfect condition today," Tom reached into his cloak, withdrawing a wand, and then handing it over to Sirius. "This is for you. You are not to use it on me."

Sirius took the wand which replaced the trainer wand he had been granted in order to use the bathroom, and tried aiming it at Tom but failed. "You can't do this."

"But I can," Tom informed him, and he circled Sirius. "You have to admire the Imperius potion. It's hellishly difficult to brew but if administered correctly, it means that a person is powerless to fight against it."

"I know how it works," Sirius had taken Newt potions. "And I will do my best to fight it."

"You've just proved you can't," Tom pointed out.

"I won't hurt anyone," Sirius ground out.

"Oh, but you will," Tom took Sirius' arm.

Sirius pulled free and stood up. "Why aren't you doing this yourself? Too afraid you might get hurt? You've already proved that you're a coward by hiding behind that mask."

Tom didn't try to regain his hold on Sirius, nor did he allow himself to get angry. "On the contrary, I am going to be carrying out one of the attacks myself. And as for the mask, I want your face to be the one that takes responsibility. You see I'm not ready for the world to know I exist just yet. I want to preserve the element of surprise until I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" Sirius demanded to know.

"To take my position as leader of the wizarding world, of course," Tom said it as if it should have been obvious.

"Dumbledore will stop you," Sirius still had faith in the Headmaster despite what had happened to Harry.

"Dumbledore is too busy playing nursemaid to his precious school," Tom had been kept up to date with the happenings at the school by Severus.

"He'll forgo that if it means taking you down," Sirius argued.

"And leave little Harry Potter all alone?" Tom taunted. "I don't think so."

Sirius went white and stumbled backwards at the mention of Harry. "Harry's alive?"

"Whoops!" said Tom in a mocking voice. "Did nobody tell you?"

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius lashed out with his fist, surprising Tom, who doubled up as the blow connected with his torso.

As he went down, Tom fumbled with his wand, and gasped out, "Stupefy."

Sirius joined Tom on the floor.

After getting his breath back, Tom rolled to his feet and walked out of the room. When he returned, the spell he had cast on Sirius had worn off, and Sirius was sitting on the bed. "You will pay for what you did later, Black, but right now we have things to do."

"I'm not helping you to destroy Harry or his friends," Sirius snapped the wand in his hand, having already tried to apparate out of the room and having failed. "So go to hell."

Tom itched to use the Cruciatus on Sirius but he didn't need a twitching and injured man at that moment, and time was running short, as the other attacks he had planned were about to take place. "I have another wand you can use. You will not damage it, and you will also never lay a finger on me again. Now get up."

Sirius found himself reluctantly rising to his feet against his will. "I won't hurt Harry."

"Harry isn't today's target, just his and his friends' families are," Tom let Sirius in on the entirety of the plan. "Now let's go."

Sirius' arm was taken once more, and the two men vanished.

Next Chapter: Sirius is forced to do Tom's bidding; Petunia Dursley has to rely on magical help; Harry's friends are hit hard.

Note: I also want to take this opportunity to wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving and to thank all those who have read this story so far. I appreciate all of your comments and support.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Nettie

Chapter 40: A Very Black Day

Grunnings Tools

Sirius stepped into the outer office he had been directed to by the pretty receptionist. And once inside, he tried his hardest not to do what he had been told, but the words spilled out anyway. "Where is Dursley?"

"Mr. Dursley is on a call," the bored looking blonde girl responded, barely giving Sirius a first glance, let alone a second one. "And he can't be disturbed."

Faced with opposition, Sirius struggled hard against himself yet again but he could do little to fight the Imperius potion that was coursing through his veins, and he turned the borrowed wand on the girl. "Avada Kedavra." The girl was dead before she even realized that she was going to die.

Sirius then flicked his wand at the door to Vernon's office, which flew open to reveal an overweight man sitting at an enormous wooden desk. It was instantly obvious to Sirius that the girl he had just killed had been asked to cover for Vernon, as rather than being on the phone, the man was instead stuffing his face with a jam and cream donut, the jam trickling down his chin like blood. Sirius got straight to the point, his wand held out in front of him. "Dursley, I want to know where you live."

Vernon recognized a wand when he saw one, as well as the man standing in front of him, but instead of running or calling for help, he found himself blurting out, "You're that escaped criminal, Brown or Black, or something."

"I am," Sirius confirmed that Vernon had been correct. "Now let's try that again. Where do you live?"

Sirius quickly wrung the answer out of Vernon, but he had orders to do more than just that, and Vernon's screams soon began to filter down to the other offices in the corridor beyond his. Wondering what was going on, the occupants of those offices spilled out into the dingily lit linoleum clad corridor, and what they saw at the end of it made some of them sick to their stomachs. And, just as Vernon had identified Sirius from the Muggle television reports, so did the other

workers there, one of the braver ones pointing at Sirius and identifying him. "It's that escaped bloke from off the news, Sirius Black."

As the blood from his slashed throat choked the very last breath out of him, Vernon gave one last gurgling moan, before stilling. Tom's other order now kicked in: Sirius had the full address of the Dursleys, he had stayed long enough to be identified, and he had butchered Vernon, and so it was time to leave. As he walked along the corridor towards the exit, Sirius could barely believe that these people were just going to let him walk past them without trying to stop him, but that was exactly what they did. No-one was brave enough to approach a blood-splattered man who the police had classified as dangerous and should not be approached, especially as Sirius was still holding the knife that he had used to massacre Vernon; most there just screamed and ran back into their offices, slamming and locking their doors behind them. But Sirius had no interest in any of them; he would have only had to attack them if they challenged him, but none did, and so, at the bottom of the staircase, he vanished without any further loss of life.

Tom was waiting for him at the agreed apparition point, and he got straight to the point. "So where do the Dursleys live?"

Sirius spat out the address, unable to stop the words from leaving his mouth, "4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging."

"That wasn't too difficult, was it?" Tom responded nastily. "Now let's move on."

Sirius could not face hurting anyone else, and he bolted, changing into his Animagus form as he did so. Unfortunately he did not get far, and found himself frozen on the spot. Tom walked over to him. "You will pay for that later, but for now I need you back in your human form."

Frozen, Sirius could not scream out as his human body took form again, the forced transformation being quite painful. Lying on the ground, unable to move, Sirius was forced to look up into the mask of the man who had just made Sirius take another human life.

Tom knelt down beside Sirius, releasing only his mouth. "Now, we are going to the Dursleys, and if I cannot get through the wards,

then you will access them, and kill the Dursleys instead. You will not attempt to run away again, and you will do as I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sirius ground out, before pleading with Tom. "You know I don't want to do this. I'd rather you kill me than help you."

"You don't have any choice in the matter," Tom released the rest of the Sirius' body from the spell, and grabbed his arm. "Let's be on our way."

4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging

After casting invisibility spells on both himself and Sirius so as not to draw attention while he worked on the wards, Tom began to try to get through, but the wards resisted every attempt he made. Giving up, Tom sighed, "I thought this might happen." And so, after releasing the invisibility spell and then using a cleaning spell on Sirius to remove all traces of Vernon Dursley's blood, Tom pointed in the direction of the house. "Black, you know what to do."

Wanting nothing more than to reduce Tom to a bloody pulp, a little like he had just done to Vernon, Sirius instead obeyed the man who had quite prudently made it impossible for Sirius to hurt him, or for Sirius to flee, simply by ordering him not to.

After casting another invisibility spell on himself, Tom stood back and watched while, as expected, Sirius walked through the wards without any problem. Sirius really didn't want to hurt anyone, and he had no Dark Mark, and the wards recognized this, a flaw in their design. Unfortunately for the Dursleys, the potion and Tom's orders were going to kick in as soon as Sirius encountered the Dursleys. But by then it would be too late and Sirius would be well inside the wards, rendering them ineffective. Tom smirked as he wondered why nobody had thought of it before.

Petunia was making her bed when the doorbell rang, and so she called out to Dudley, who was in his bedroom, "Dudley, Mummy's busy. Can you see who that is?"

Dudley, who had gotten up unusually early that morning, and was now playing his favorite video game, reluctantly got off his bed, and grumbling, he looked out of the window. He didn't recognize the man standing below at the front door. He yelled back at his mother. "I dunno who it is."

"Well, go down and ask what he wants," Petunia snapped, wanting to get her room tidy so that she could watch the lifestyle programs that began after breakfast television ended.

Dudley couldn't be bothered to walk downstairs, so he instead leaned out of the window. "Oy, you!"

Sirius looked up. "Are you Dudley Dursley?"

Dudley wondered what this man wanted with him, but he still answered in the positive. "Yeah. Why?"

"That's all I needed to know," Sirius responded, and turned his wand upwards. "Avada Kedavra."

Dudley saved himself by throwing himself backwards onto the floor.

Downstairs, Sirius aimed his wand at the front door to gain entrance. "Reducto."

"Mum! Mum!" Dudley screamed, getting to his feet. "It's one of them freaks."

The sound of the front door exploding and her son's screams compelled Petunia into action. Dropping the pillow she had been about to place on the bed, she ran across the landing and into her son's room, a bolt of green narrowly missing her as Sirius came up the stairs. Her heart pounding, Petunia screeched at Dudley, "Take my hand! Take my hand!"

A terrified Dudley didn't really need telling twice, and he grabbed his mother's hand tightly, screaming yet again at the sight of the dark-haired man in the doorway. "Mum!"

Firmly grasping her son's hand, Petunia called out "Sanctuary Potter", and the pair of them vanished from the house, the killing

curse that Sirius sent their way passing harmlessly through the space where they had just been standing.

Watching the Dursleys disappear, Sirius couldn't help but feel elated and relieved that he had failed, even though he suspected that he would pay for it later. And even though he was still aghast at what he had done to Vernon, Sirius began to whistle a jaunty tune as he got closer to where he had left Tom, which he hoped would anger the man.

It did, and after dropping his invisibility spell, Tom scowled behind his mask at the bright smiling face of Sirius Black. "You are far too happy for someone who has just committed murders he begged me to spare him from doing."

"That's because I didn't murder anyone," Sirius kept smiling as he spoke.

"That's impossible," Tom snapped out, before testing out the potion's effectiveness. "Kneel and tell me you are my servant."

Sirius did as he was told, grinning as he did so, as although the potion was forcing him to do as he was told, Sirius was able to respond quite literally, and in a way he knew would irritate Tom. "You are my servant."

Tom realized he had walked straight into that one, but he forced himself to curb his anger at Sirius' ploy; he was more interested in how the Dursleys had managed to escape death than he was in Sirius' silliness. "How did the Dursleys survive?"

"They portkeyed out of the house before I could kill them," Sirius had little choice but to tell the truth. However, given the pleasure he had felt at being able to annoy Tom, Sirius once again utilised the only weapon he had left: words. "So I do believe that the score stands at one to you, and given what's just happened, I'd say it's also one to the great Albus Dumbledore. You've been outwitted, whoever you are, so your clever plan isn't so clever now, is it?"

Tom finally lost his temper at Sirius' slur, and he turned his wand on Sirius, uncaring that they were in the middle of a Muggle street. "Crucio."

As Sirius had expected, he was being punished for losing the Dursleys, and for the insult he had just paid Tom, but even as he screamed out his pain, Sirius experienced no small amount of pleasure knowing that Tom had been thwarted. However, the pain ended moments later, as pops began to sound around them, and aware that it was probably Aurors come to investigate, Tom grabbed Sirius' arm once more, apparating them out before they could be attacked.

Hogwarts

"I've written to Charlie, and said that I will be going this Easter after all," Lucy told Harry, having originally said no since she was still unsure about Charlie's youthfulness. In the end it had been Remus who had talked her into giving the relationship a shot. As Lucy finished speaking, a knock on the door disturbed them. "Excuse me."

When she opened the door she found Amelia and Minerva outside, and she knew almost immediately from their faces that something was wrong. "What's happened?"

"We need to talk to both of you," Amelia stepped into the room when Lucy stepped aside. "Hello, Harry."

"Hi, Amelia," Harry greeted the grave looking Amelia.

"I'm afraid we're here with bad news," Amelia sat down opposite Harry.

Minerva, however, sat right by Harry, and delivered the bad news herself. "Harry, I'm so very sorry but your Uncle has been killed."

"Uncle Vernon?" Harry asked, even though he knew it was stupid to do so – he only had one uncle and it therefore could not have been anyone else.

"I'm afraid so," Amelia confirmed Harry's question. "And it wasn't an accident. He was attacked in his office, and both he and his secretary were killed."

"What about Aunt Petunia and Dudley?" Harry asked, feeling more than a little numb.

"They're both safe, although they too were targeted," Amelia told him. "Your aunt and cousin escaped by means of a portkey."

"But I thought a portkey could only be used by someone magical," Harry immediately recalled what he had learnt at the end of his third year.

"Your aunt is a squib," Minerva revealed the truth about Petunia.

Harry was more shocked about this than he had been about Vernon's death. "But I thought Mum was a Muggleborn!"

"Albus knew she was not but he couldn't tell anyone the truth, not even Lily, as Petunia forbade him to," Minerva revealed.

"Why would she do that?" Harry asked, a little puzzled as to how Petunia even knew herself, and how Petunia had managed to get Albus to agree to her secret.

Because of the circumstances that had arisen, Minerva had been made aware that Albus was able to detect magical signatures, and that he had detected a faint one around Petunia when he had met her at Lily's graduation – something Petunia had been forced to attend by her parents.

But even Minerva did not know that Albus had tried to explain to Petunia about her miniscule magical side, and that even though she herself was unable to perform magic, her children might be able to. But Petunia had not wanted to listen, and had forbidden the Headmaster to mention something she found so abhorrent and disgusting to anyone else, including her sister.

Minerva therefore could not tell Harry what she did not know herself. "That is between the Headmaster and Petunia. But knowing this, when Albus delivered you to her home, he also included a portkey that would provide protection for all of you on the off chance that you were ever attacked. Luckily for her, your aunt was wearing the necklace when they were attacked today, and it is this necklace that saved her and Dudley's lives."

Harry could barely believe what he was hearing. "I'm surprised she was wearing it."

"Once placed around the neck, it couldn't be removed," Minerva had thought it was a wise decision by Albus. "And apparently Albus made it attractive enough that she would be tempted to try it on."

Harry recalled his aunt wearing several necklaces, but one in particular had never come off. "Is it a gold necklace with a diamond thingy in it?"

"I don't know," Minerva had never seen the necklace, or even been aware of it until that very day. "In any case, the necklace took her and Dudley to a safe house."

"I thought you said that no-one could get past the wards that Amelia had had put up around the house," Harry brought up a conversation that he had had with Minerva when he had balked at the idea of returning to his relatives' home in the summer.

Minerva had to admit that she had thought the same. "The blood wards are now failing because you didn't return last year. But even so, the Gringotts' wards, which are still intact, should have prevented Black or anyone else with a Dark Mark from getting anywhere near the house. And both sets of wards should have stopped anyone meaning to harm the Dursleys, and so we still don't know how Black did it."

Harry now understood why the Dursleys had been targeted; neither Amelia nor Minerva having mentioned it was Sirius Black before then. "Black went after the Dursleys because of me, didn't he?"

"We believe so, but Harry, I'm afraid that they weren't the only people who were attacked today," Amelia knew the next part was going to be hard for Lucy to hear. "There was also an attack on my home, and it was completely destroyed."

"Does that mean my house has gone too?" Lucy remembered that Amelia had said that she wanted to talk to both her and Harry.

"I'm afraid so," Amelia said gently. "They were both burnt beyond saving."

Harry turned an apprehensive face to Lucy. "I'm really sorry, Lucy."

Lucy could see that Harry was worried she would blame him. "Harry, it isn't your fault."

"But..." Harry began.

Lucy wasn't going to let Harry assume the blame for something he had no control over. "Unless you aimed your wand at my house and set fire to it, then it isn't your fault."

"And I feel the same way," Amelia told Harry before he could say anything else. "My position opens me up to attack, and I believe that Black used the diversion of attacking your relatives to set up an attack on my home while I was engaged elsewhere. So none of what has happened to me or to Lucy has anything to do with you."

"But Uncle Vernon dying does," Harry said a little glumly, and he wondered how his Aunt was dealing with the situation. "Where is the safe house?"

"Near a Muggle area, so as much as possible is normal for Mrs. Dursley and her son," Amelia did not reveal the location though. "However, she's extremely upset as you might have gathered, but once things have calmed down, we're going to arrange for her to adopt a new identity and to move back into the Muggle world."

"I bet she blames me, doesn't she?" Harry already knew the answer but he still asked anyway.

"Yes," Amelia wasn't going to lie to Harry. "However, she's..."

Yet another knock sounded at the door, and Lucy opened it to find Tonks and the Headmaster, who had been on his way to Lucy's rooms to see Harry, standing there. "If you're after Amelia, she's here."

Tonks hurried in. "Ma'am, we've received a Muggle report that a woman's husband was killed by unknown assailants in Kent."

"Who?" Amelia barked out.

"A Dr. Lester Granger," Tonks hurriedly spat out. "Two staff members, and two patients were also killed. However, Dr. Virginia Granger survived, and she fled to a police station after the attack, and she's still there now."

Harry paled as he worked out who it was that Tonks was talking about. "That's Hermione's parents."

"That's why the report was intercepted," Tonks informed him.

"We need to get her to safety," Albus declared, before calling out to a house-elf, and giving it instructions when it appeared. "Vickers, can you fetch Professor Lupin for me? Tell him I have an errand for him to conduct."

Amelia guessed immediately at what the errand was, and discovered she was a little annoyed at Albus' interference. "I can send one of my Aurors to recover her."

"Remus knows the Muggle world well," Albus was worried that Virginia would be tracked down. "And..."

"What about my other friends?" Harry anxiously interrupted Albus and Amelia's disagreement. "If Hermione's family is being attacked, then everyone else I'm friends with might also be in danger as well."

Albus realized that Harry was right, and he once more called out to Vickers, giving the house-elf further instructions. "Please fetch Professor Snape for me. Tell him it is a matter of extreme urgency."

"Albus, may I have a word in private?" Amelia asked, as soon as the house-elf had left. She then headed into the far corner of the room where she set up a privacy bubble, and then angrily lit into Albus. "I am the head of BritAD, and I believe I have jurisdiction over what happens here, and not you."

"In normal circumstances I would agree. But both Severus and Remus are au fait with the Muggle world, and we need to act quickly," Albus spoke rapidly, explaining his interference. "And it would take too much time to find suitable Aurors and get them out there."

"I already know which Aurors are Muggle au fait, and it would therefore take me very little time to organize them," Amelia contradicted Albus' assumption. "And Auror Tonks, who is currently on site, is one of them."

"Then we should send Remus, Severus, and Auror Tonks to each of Harry's friends' Muggle homes," Albus had no intention of stepping on Amelia's toes but he was very much of the opinion that time was of the essence, and that despite Amelia's assurances to the contrary, it would take far longer for Amelia to organize her Muggle au fait Aurors than it would to use the resources he had on hand.

"Very well," Amelia knew that the longer she argued with Albus over the matter, the more danger the possible targets would be in. "I'll authorize portkeys for them to use."

"And I will set up the fireplace in here for outgoing travel while we wait," Albus headed over to the fireplace to unlock it, and to allow free passage to the outside of the school. He wasn't, however, willing to risk the students by allowing anyone free passage back in.

Severus was the first to arrive, and he volunteered to go to the police station – he didn't want to have to explain to Tom why he was protecting Harry's friends or to come under friendly fire. After taking a medallion from Albus he turned to leave, only to turn back when Amelia offered up a portkey, which Severus immediately refused, saying he would apparate Virginia back. Clutching the slip of parchment with the address of the police station on it, Severus stepped into the fireplace, and called out his destination, before vanishing in a puff of green smoke.

Remus arrived moments later, and he too was dispatched, together with two Aurors, who had accompanied Amelia to Hogwarts, to Fletchley Manor. Tonks had left before either Severus or Remus, and was now on her way with two other Aurors to go to Hannah Abbott's home. After seeing the three Muggle rescue parties on their way, Amelia then used the fireplace to contact BritAD, and within a few minutes more Aurors were also heading out to the Lovegood home, and to the Burrow.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry began pacing the floor, nerves almost overwhelming him. "What happens now?"

Amelia knew that her answer would not be received well, but it was the same with every matter like this. "There's nothing we can do except to wait for news."

Harry felt frustrated by Amelia's answer but Amelia was correct, and there was nothing Harry could do, except to wait to hear if his friends' families had made it through the day.

Two Hours Earlier - Granger Dentistry, The Palisades, Kent

Virginia frowned as she heard a clatter of instruments and a scream, and she excused herself from her patient. "I'll just be a moment." She didn't get a chance to see what was going on, as the trouble came to her. About to leave the room, Virginia's heart leapt into her mouth when her door opened up and she came face to face with a silver-masked man who was carrying a wand, and she began to back up in terror. "Get away from me."

The man ignored Virginia's entreaty, and followed her into the room. Once inside, he aimed his wand at the patient in the chair, executing them without fanfare. "Avada Kedavra."

When he turned his wand on her, Virginia screamed, and grabbing a tray of instruments, threw them at the man.

The man tutted as he advanced on the frightened woman. "That wasn't very nice."

Virginia was now cornered, and having nowhere else to go, she backed towards the far side of the room, her silvery blonde hair falling out from her bun and framing her delicate features, and her breasts rising and falling with every frightened breath she took.

Lucius decided that the woman in front of him presented a very desirable picture. "You're quite something, my dear." Lucius then took pleasure in frightening Virginia even more by telling her what was going to happen. "Now, you can fight me, or you can make it easy on yourself by giving me what I want. But either way, it goes without saying that you're going to die, but not before I have you."

As Lucius advanced on her, a terrified Virginia continued to back up until she careened into the long granite counter that ran the length of the room. Lucius revelled in the power he was feeling, and shook his head at Virginia. "There's nowhere to run." However, he failed to notice Virginia's hand slip behind her as she desperately tried to find something on the counter to use to defend herself, Lucius' eyes being too firmly fixed on Virginia's heaving breasts. And, wanting to see more, Lucius reached out and tugged open the front of Virginia's white lab coat to reveal a white blouse beneath it. When she made no attempt to stop him, Lucius caressed her cheek. "I'm so that glad you're not going to fight me. It's better this way."

Virginia's mouth was too dry to answer, but she hoped that by letting Lucius take what he wanted, he would miss what she was doing behind her back, especially as he was still clutching his wand.

Her ploy worked. Lucius took little notice of anything else but Virginia's breasts, which he could see through the blouse since Virginia wasn't wearing a bra, and he murmured appreciatively, "Very nice."

Virginia gasped but made no attempt to pull away as Lucius tore open the blouse, exposing Virginia's breasts to him. Already partially aroused, Lucius grew harder as he used his left hand to cup one of Virginia's breasts. Then, believing Virginia to be transfixed with fear, Lucius pushed up her skirt, pressing Virginia more firmly against the counter, before ripping her panties away. And just as Lucius began to unbutton the placket on his trousers, Virginia's fingers finally curled around something she could use: a scalpel.

An unsuspecting Lucius released himself from his trousers, and positioned himself between Virginia's unresisting legs. "It's been a long time since I've had this kind of fun."

Virginia experienced a wave of nausea; she had never hurt anyone before in her life but she was painfully aware that if she could not do what she needed to, then Lucius would rape, and then murder her. And so, just as Lucius began to try to push into her, Virginia grasped the scalpel more firmly, before lifting her arm up and driving the scalpel between Lucius' shoulders. Taken completely by surprise, Lucius screamed out and backed away from Virginia, dropping his wand, and desperately trying to reach the scalpel that was now firmly wedged in the center of his back.

Virginia didn't hesitate to take advantage of the moment, and she drove her foot as hard as she could into the gap between Lucius' legs. "Bastard!"

As Lucius collapsed onto the floor, torn between trying to remove the scalpel or cup his testicles, Virginia grabbed his wand off the floor, and snapped it in two. Fearful that there might be others outside of her office, Virginia ran to the window, opened it and slithered out, pulling her skirt down as she landed on the grass outside. As Virginia ran, she checked her pocket for her car keys, and was filled with relief to find them nestled in there, for even though she had destroyed her attacker's wand, she was still terrified that Lucius or someone else would come after her. Opening her car door, she climbed in, her hands shaking as she shoved the key into the ignition. "Please start. Please start."

The car's engine roared to life before she had even finishing speaking, and spraying gravel behind her, Virginia drove out of the car park. Thankfully the police station was only a few minutes' drive away, and with tears running down her cheeks, Virginia shakily drove up to it, and jumped out of her car, leaving it unlocked and running, before darting up the steps. "I need help."

Immediately sizing up the situation, a policeman came hurrying around the glass fronted reception area. "Ma'am?"

"Someone attacked me in my office, and killed my patient," Virginia was crying unrestrainedly now, holding her unbuttoned lab coat together. "I, oh God, my husband's still in there."

"Can you give me your name?" The policeman, a sergeant, asked gently but firmly.

"Dr. Virginia Granger. My husband's name is Lester," Virginia sobbed out. "We own Granger Dentistry at the Palisades."

"I'll send a car out immediately," the officer informed her, and he turned to the policewoman behind the screen. "Did you catch that, Constable?"

"I'm on it, Sir," the girl responded.

The officer turned back to face Virginia, before gesturing her towards a side door, which he opened. "If you'd like to take a seat, I'll be back to speak to you when I know more. In the meantime, I'll ask someone to get you a cup of coffee, and arrange for a female police officer to interview you."

"I don't drink coffee," Virginia gave a tiny hiccupping sob. "Only my husband does."

"I'll get someone to bring you a cup of tea then," the officer promised before closing the door behind him.

Almost two hours, one interview, and one medical examination later, just as Virginia thought she was going to explode from worry, the door opened yet again, and a sour faced man came into the interview room. "Dr. Granger, if you'll come with me."

"Where is my husband? Do you know what's happened to him?" Virginia asked, as she followed the man down the corridor.

The man ignored her questions, and wrapped his fingers tightly around Virginia's arm. "We're leaving."

"What the hell are you doing?" Virginia started to struggle but it was too late, and with a horrible squashing sensation, she was gone from the police station.

When the feeling ended, she found herself standing in the open air, and she kicked out at her captor with her boots. "Let go of me, you bastard."

Her wish was granted but before she could move, six wand-toting men came seemingly out of nowhere, the tallest one asking, "Who goes there?"

Virginia gave a small hysterical giggle. "Who goes there? What is this - 18th century England?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the man who had taken her snapped, before addressing the men. "I have Dr. Virginia Granger with me."

The men kept their wands trained on the couple, and the tallest one spoke again. "Professor Snape, I need a password."

"Invictus," Severus gave the password, and the men faded back into the shadows. He then turned to Virginia. "As you may have gathered, I am Professor Snape, and I was asked by the Headmaster of Hogwarts to bring you here for your safety."

Virginia turned around, and for a moment she forgot her predicament at the sight of the dark and shadowy decrepit remains of a building up on the hill beyond the gates. "You brought me to a ruin for my safety?"

Severus realized then that he hadn't given her the medallion Albus had charmed for him. "Put this on."

Virginia slipped the medallion around her neck. As she did so, the ruin changed to become a large and beautifully lit building. "Oh, my God! That's Hogwarts."

"I know that," Severus scowled and held out his hand, a look of distaste on his face. "And to get through the wards and inside of it, you'll need to be touching me."

Virginia thought about who had been left behind. "But what about Lester? You still haven't told me where he is."

"Let's just get inside," Severus said impatiently.

Now sure that this man was not going to hurt her, Virginia stood her ground. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," Severus answered quite bluntly, just wanting to deliver this woman and get back to his office.

Virginia put a hand to her mouth as she tried to bite back a sob. "We haven't been getting along but I didn't want this."

"I understand that," Severus said shortly, and he held out his hand again. "But I need to get you inside."

"You mean that the same man who tried to rape me might come after me here?" Virginia asked, as she let Severus take her hand.

"I doubt it," Severus dragged Virginia inside, before something occurred to him. "Did you see his face?"

"No, he was wearing a silver mask," Virginia pulled free as soon as they had cleared the gates, and Severus told her they were through the wards. "Do you know who he was?"

"A Death Eater I presume," Severus said in an off-hand manner, and he then led the way up the path. "This way."

"How did you know where I was?" Virginia stumbled as she made her way up the steep path.

"Does it matter?" Severus didn't want to chatter to Granger's mother, who should have been dead, but thanks to Lucius being unable to control his baser urges, instead she was here, and being escorted by Severus to safety. "I'm going to take you to a guest room and bring your daughter to you."

"Thank you," Virginia kept up with the man with difficulty, and neither spoke again until they finally got inside the school. Once there, as Severus had promised, she was shown to a room, and the door closed behind her.

Current time - Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire

Cordelia Finch-Fletchley looked wildly around her. Somehow she had gotten into the woods but could not recall how. The last thing she remembered was screaming as her husband had been tortured and then executed. What was more alarming for her was that she also could not remember where she lived. Deciding that she was probably in shock, Cordelia stumbled through the woods, keeping low to the ground, and trying not to make too much noise; she had heard shouting a few minutes earlier and she was terrified that it had something to do with her but the sound had eventually faded away into the distance.

However, her journey was ended when, without warning, a hand clamped over her mouth, and she was forced roughly to the ground. "Keep quiet and don't move," a voice hissed into her ear.

Cordelia tried to struggle despite the man's words, but it was like being held in an iron band, and she went limp when the man again hissed a warning at her, telling her, "If you want to live, keep still."

The reason for the man's order became apparent when, moments later, more voices reached Cordelia's ears. Unlike before, this time she could hear what they were saying, and it was obvious that the owners of the voices were hunting for her. The voices grew louder and then dimmed, as they had earlier. Only when it was completely silent did the man haul Cordelia to her feet, and taking her hand, he tugged her in the opposite direction to the way the hunters had gone.

With all of her attention being focused upon staying on her feet in the dark and debris strewn woods, Cordelia couldn't even protest at her rough handling, or even ask what was going on. But what was more frightening than being tugged along in the dark by an unknown assailant, who she could only hope was there to help, were the shouts that sprang up from their left. Cordelia screamed as a green light narrowly missed her, blowing a massive hole in the tree just ahead of them.

Her scream died though as she felt a strange tingling go over her body. At the same time, the man stopped abruptly, causing Cordelia to catapult into him, and a second scream issued from her throat as she began to try and fight him when he wrapped both arms around her to hold her closely against his hard body. The man then uttered something Cordelia didn't catch, and with a tugging sensation in the middle of her stomach, they vanished.

Cordelia gasped as she found herself standing outside a set of gates that she could barely make out in the dark night. The identity of the man was revealed when a voice asked for identification.

The man lit up his wand. "It's Professor Lupin, and one other, Cordelia Finch-Fletchley."

As they had with Severus and Virginia, the Aurors slipped back out of sight once Remus had given the password. Now certain that she wouldn't try to run, Remus finally let go of Cordelia and pointed behind him. "I need to get you inside."

Only then did Cordelia look up, and her mouth fell onto her chin. "That's Hogwarts, isn't it? Even in the dark I can recognize it from Justin's book."

Remus was taken aback. "You can see it?"

"Of course I can," Cordelia dragged her gaze away from the majestic candlelit building. "You seem surprised."

"I haven't given you this yet," Remus held out a gold medallion that twinkled in the light of Remus' wand. "It was supposed to allow you to see Hogwarts and not a derelict building."

Cordelia was confused. "A derelict building?"

"It's what Muggles see to keep them away," Remus explained. "But you're obviously not a Muggle."

Cordelia knew from Justin what a Muggle was. "Of course I am."

"I don't think you are," Remus held out his hand. "And you need to take my hand to get you inside the wards."

"Wards are magical barriers, aren't they?" Cordelia recalled what Justin had told her as she slipped her hand into Remus' larger one.

Remus pushed open the gates. "Yes."

Cordelia gave a shiver as they moved inside the gates. "I felt the same sensation just before we appeared here."

"Once more confirming that you can't be a Muggle," Remus turned and started up the hill. "Only someone who is magical can feel wards."

"I'm not magical," Cordelia again refuted Remus' claim. "I've never done any magic in my life."

Remus came up with an alternative suggestion. "Perhaps you're a squib then."

"A squib?" Cordelia couldn't recall the phrase.

Remus outlined in simple terms what a squib was. "Someone who has magical potential but it is so miniscule as to render them like a Muggle."

"Is that why Justin is magical? Because I'm a squib?" Cordelia stumbled as she asked, and she stopped walking.

Remus ignored Cordelia's questions, and instead decided to see why Cordelia had come to a halt. "Is something wrong?"

"This hill is steep, you walk far more quickly than I do, and I'm wearing heels," Cordelia looked down at her entirely unsuitable footwear.

"I should have thought of that," Remus aimed his lit wand at her shoes and transfigured them into Muggle trainers. "Is that better?"

"Much," Cordelia settled into a jog, and now it was Remus who had to lengthen his stride to keep up with her.

"You're quite fit," Remus remarked as they climbed the hill towards the school building.

"I like to exercise," Cordelia responded, not even vaguely out of breath as she navigated the steep hill by the light of Remus' wand. "You must too; you're not exactly unfit yourself."

"I suppose you might say that," Remus remarked as he reached the doors of the school to find Lucy waiting. "Lucy, this is Cordelia Finch-Fletchley. Can you take her to my rooms? I need to get back out there, and let the Aurors who were with me know that I have her, and to try to find her husband."

"Wait," Cordelia grabbed Remus' arm, not wanting Remus to embark on a wild goose chase. "Edmund is dead. Whoever attacked us, tortured and killed him."

Remus decided that finding the Aurors could wait for a moment. "How did you escape?"

"I don't know," Cordelia still had no idea what had happened. "Somehow I was with Edmund, and then I wasn't, and I was in the woods."

"I think you may have apparated," Remus came up with the only logical solution he could.

"You're a witch?" Lucy asked in astonishment.

"I think she's a squib," Remus interjected. "And just like distraught children who amplify their power when they're distressed, given the situation, I believe Cordelia did the same with the little magic she has inside of her, allowing her to apparate out."

"Now you know what the situation is, I think you should track down the Aurors, and I'll take care of Mrs. Finch-Fletchley," Lucy put an arm around Cordelia as Remus did exactly as Lucy suggested. "I'm Lucy Viking."

"You're the tutor Justin's mentioned?" Cordelia asked in surprise.

"I know, I look younger than I am," Lucy led the way to the staircase and up the stairs.

Cordelia glanced around with interest as she walked up the corridor when they left the staircase. "Is this the second floor?"

"Yes," Lucy guessed what was bothering her. "But you don't have to worry. The Basilisk that was in the Chamber is dead. Harry Potter killed it."

"Professor Lupin told me at the start of the year," Cordelia responded, before her voice faltered. "He was really nice, but I never expected to see him again, least of all rescuing me after an attack."

"I know. This is us," Lucy said softly as she halted in front of a large oak door.

Cordelia found herself being led into a large sitting room. "You have a nice room."

"These are actually Remus' rooms," Lucy reminded her of what Remus had said, before she headed into the kitchenette. "I'll make you some tea and then fetch Justin. I thought you might like a few minutes to collect yourself before you see him."

Cordelia was glad that Lucy was being so understanding. "It's going to be a shock for him." Something else then occurred to her. "My staff – they're my friends and I didn't even think about them."

"It's the shock," Lucy assured her as she put down the tea she was making, and went back to sit down beside Cordelia, taking her hand. "And I'm sorry, but given what's happened to your husband, then they're probably also dead."

Cordelia finally started to cry. "Why? They'd never hurt anyone."

Lucy drew Cordelia to her. "Death Eaters don't care about that."

"Death Eaters?" Cordelia tugged free, as struggled to get a hold of her emotions. "What are they?"

"Did the people who attacked you wear white masks?" Lucy thought she had better check first before continuing with an explanation.

"Yes. Well, they were mostly white but the man who killed my husband had a gold mask," Cordelia thought back, and frowned. "It's strange. I can remember that we were attacked, and the man attacking him, but I can't remember where it took place, or where I live. Oh God, I can't remember. I can't remember."

Lucy quickly got up as Cordelia began to panic. "Keep taking deep breaths." She soon returned with a vial of purple potion. "This is calming potion. It will help you to relax."

Trusting Lucy, Cordelia grabbed the vial and downed the potion in one fluid motion. Within seconds, her panicked expression vanished, and she was able to breathe normally again. "Thank you. This is amazing stuff."

"It is, but I wouldn't recommend taking too much of it. Crying helps in the grieving process, but at a time like this, I think you need to keep a level head," Lucy took back the empty vial. "And while the calming potion won't dull your senses totally, it will stop you from crying and panicking as you just did. Now I should get back to making you some tea."

Cordelia got to her feet, the worst of her feelings masked by the potion, allowing her to function properly. "Please let me help you."

Lucy pointed out where the mugs were, and she resumed making the tea. "So a Death Eater was wearing a gold mask?" When Cordelia confirmed what she had already said, Lucy grimaced. "That's new."

"Don't they normally have masks to delineate authority?" Cordelia had assumed that this was what the gold mask meant.

"There are a small group of Death Eaters known as the Inner Circle who wear silver masks, but You-Know-Who always shunned such a thing," Lucy spoke to Cordelia as though knew what she going on about. "Sorry, you don't have any idea of what I'm talking about, do you?"

"I do, and I should have recognized the term Death Eaters earlier, but I think I was too upset to think clearly," Cordelia took a mug of tea from Lucy. "Justin has told me who Harry is, and what happened to him as a baby, so I know who this Voldemort person is, and that no-one calls him by his real name." She had noticed Lucy wince as she mentioned 'Voldemort'. "Sorry."

Lucy brushed off Cordelia's apology. "It's not your fault."

Cordelia headed back into the cozy sitting room. "So do you know who's behind the gold mask?"

Lucy shrugged. "Possibly. The man who attacked you is believed to be Sirius Black, or at least one of his associates."

Cordelia made a slight sound as she recognized the name. "But isn't Black a Muggle?"

"That's just what your police believe," Lucy could see that her explanation was not making any sense to Cordelia, and so she went on. "We have squibs who act as Muggle liaisons, and any Muggle reports that may be of import are passed onto our magical law enforcement, and then onto Amelia Bones, head of British Auror Division, and vice versa. That's how the Muggle police know about Black, and how we knew about you. Amelia was here on other

business when the news came out about you, and Remus was sent to collect you."

"But why him?" Cordelia asked, a little bewildered. "I know he's very capable, but he's just a teacher."

"He's very used to the Muggle world," Lucy explained, "and a confidante of the Headmaster, who is the Head of the Wizengamot, a sort of magical court. As you heard though, Remus didn't go alone, taking Aurors, who are our police, with him since there wasn't time to try and locate Aurors who would be as au fait with the Muggle world as Remus."

"But he didn't have to go into the Muggle world at all," Cordelia started to make clear to Lucy what had happened. "I somehow ended up in the woods, and he found me there; I still don't know how. It was pitch black out there, and I was doing my best to stay hidden."

Lucy knew that Remus was a werewolf, but she gave Cordelia a generalized answer, not wanting to reveal Remus' secret. "We have tracking spells."

"That's how those men must have found me," Cordelia mused. "But do you know why were we attacked?"

"Because your son is Harry's best friend," Lucy waited for the woman to lash out but she didn't.

"Is Harry alright?" Cordelia asked, guessing that Harry was probably beating himself up over this, at least figuratively speaking.

"Not really. His Uncle was killed this morning, and when I last checked, he was with your son," Lucy stood up. "And speaking of Justin, I think I should get him."

Cordelia stopped her, still having a few questions. "What about Harry's other friends, such as Justin's girlfriend, Hannah? Has her family been attacked as well? "

"No, they so far haven't been targeted," Lucy sat back down, not sure how long this would take. "A Muggle au fait Auror led a team to collect Hannah and her family, and just to be on the safe side,

they've been taken to a safe house. But unfortunately two of Harry's other friends, Hermione Granger, and Luna Lovegood, have both lost their fathers; Hermione's father was killed in an attack on his dental surgery, and Luna's father was caught in his printing house when it was blown up. Hermione's mother, however, survived, and she's here with Hermione. One of the other professors collected her from the police station she had fled to."

"Those poor people," Cordelia's heart went out to them. "What about the other girl, Luna wasn't it? Is no-one here with her?"

"Her mother died before she started at Hogwarts; her father was really the only close family she had," Lucy had checked with Professor Flitwick. "Her mother did have a cousin but she died six months ago of old age, and while the cousin had children, they live in Ireland, and so really Luna's all alone. She's been taken to her head of house's rooms for tonight at least."

"How could one man do something so terrible?" Cordelia shook her head in dismay as she thought about how many people had lost loved ones that day. "To attack so many people?"

Lucy decided that Cordelia may as well know everything. "That's not all he's done. I've lost my home, and Harry's friend, Susan, has lost hers as well, but thankfully no-one was killed. And the Weasleys, a family which has literally taken Harry under their wing, were also attacked but the damage was minor, and again no-one was hurt."

"Do you think your magical police will be able to find Black and make him pay for what's he done?" Cordelia slumped back onto the sofa as she asked.

"They haven't yet as he went to ground, and we don't have any idea where he is," Lucy knew that this probably wasn't what Cordelia wanted to hear and so she tried to lighten things up. "And the only bright spot today - well, it's not really a bright spot, but I'm not really sure what else to call it – is a failed attack."

"Tell me about it," Cordelia urged, needing some good news.

"One of the son's of the family I mentioned, the Weasleys, has sort of become a big brother to Harry, and as such an attack was made on the dragon reserve Charlie works at," Lucy wasn't surprised

when Cordelia's eyes widened at the mention of dragons. "But in that place the Death Eaters bit off more than they could chew, quite literally actually."

Cordelia shuddered as she guessed at what Lucy was hinting at. "The dragons ate them?"

"Dragons are easily startled, and when the Death Eaters opened fire, several of them broke free from their cages, and attacked the Death Eaters," Lucy explained what she had been told. "The keepers knew only too well to keep back, so there was little they could do."

"Why didn't the Death Eaters app..." here Cordelia hesitated, not remembering the correct term.

Lucy therefore finished the word off for her. "Apparate. Two of them did but the other three lost their heads, and the dragons didn't hesitate to make the most of it."

As Cordelia tried to take in everything Lucy had told her, she became aware that Remus had just walked in, and she therefore stood up and held out her hand. "I didn't get a chance to thank you before you left."

"I'm just sorry I wasn't able to save your husband," Remus said, moving across the room, and taking Cordelia's hand, but squeezing it in consolation, rather than shaking it.

"Thank you," Cordelia took back her hand, and turned to Lucy. "As much as I'm dreading it, I think I should talk to my son now."

"Wait here and I'll fetch him," Lucy offered.

Remus could see that Cordelia had finished her mug of tea. "Would you like some more tea?"

"Please, Professor," Cordelia smiled despite the gravity of the situation. "That's just so British, isn't it - a cup of tea when things get tough."

"I find it works for me, and you should call me Remus," Remus told her, before he swiftly prepared a fresh pot. "I'll sort out a mug for Justin, although I doubt he's going to want one."

"Do you have any more of that calming potion?" Cordelia asked hopefully. "It will help him deal with this a little better, and give him more time for things to sink in. It's worked for me."

"I'll get some," Remus said, and then turned to grab a vial. "Would you like another one?"

"No, thank you," Cordelia took the vial from Remus for her son. "Edmund's death is going to hit Justin far harder than it hit me." Cordelia didn't know why, but just as she had done when she had met him at the start of the year, she was able to talk openly to Remus, even though she barely knew him. "I was more upset over losing my staff; they were my friends, and all they ever did was to be good to me – they didn't deserve this."

Remus didn't question Cordelia's seeming lack of feelings for husband, instead he commiserated with her. "Nobody did, but Black obviously doesn't care about you or anyone else." He turned at the sound of the door handle being turned. "I'll leave the tea here if you want it."

"Thank you, Remus," Cordelia smiled briefly at Remus before heading into the sitting room, Justin flying into her arms. "Justie, darling, I'm so sorry."

Justin lifted up his head. "Mum?"

"Take this," Cordelia offered the vial of calming potion.

Justin refused, and in a trembling voice he asked what he already knew. "Father is dead, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," Cordelia hugged Justin tighter. "And as far as I know, so are Marissa and the others."

Justin broke down and started to weep. As he did so, Remus nodded towards the door, and he and Lucy left the pair alone to grieve together.

Next Chapter: Harry makes an offer; Voldemort takes note of the attacks; Cornelius Fudge brings in more security at Hogwarts; Virginia drops a bombshell on Hermione.

Chapter 41: Picking Up the Pieces

Hogwarts

Harry was exhausted. He had been up all night with Luna, who had not wanted to stay with Professor Flitwick, and had begged to be allowed to go to Harry's side. Harry had instantly agreed that she could. Almost immediately upon being hugged by Harry, Luna had assured him that what had happened was not his fault, going so far as to suggest that some of the things her father had printed in the Quibbler were more than likely to blame for the attack on Xenophilius.

Not wanting to upset her further, Harry had felt forced to accept Luna's words. But he believed deep down it was his fault, and as he had listened to the blonde girl as she had talked about her parents, he suspected she believed the same thing as well. He had almost been glad when she had finally broken down, asking 'why?'. Harry had had no real answers, and he had therefore been unable to do anything but to hold Luna in an effort to try to comfort her.

If that wasn't bad enough, when he had left Luna sleeping, he had been hit by the news about the attempted rape on Virginia. Hermione had been understandably upset but just like Luna, had refused to let Harry take the blame. But the most difficult thing of all for Harry was to be what happened the next morning.

Amelia Bones entered Minerva's rooms to find a bleary-eyed Harry drinking hot chocolate with Minerva. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

Harry yawned. "I couldn't sleep anyway."

Minerva spotted what Harry had missed – a bloody envelope with his name on it. "That's not good news, is it?"

Amelia glanced down at her hand. "I doubt it, but we haven't opened it yet."

Harry finally noticed the envelope, and that it had his name on it. "Where did you get that?"

"Edmund Finch-Fletchley's body was recovered outside the Ministry," Amelia refrained from mentioning in detail about the state

it had been in. "And this envelope addressed to you was attached to the front of it."

Harry held out his hand. "May I?"

Amelia handed it over. "Before you read it, don't take whatever might be written inside personally."

"But it is personal," Harry observed, and he ripped open the envelope, withdrawing a piece of heavyweight parchment out of it, before reading aloud.

'Potter,

Because of you I have spent more years than I care to remember suffering in Azkaban. I can only wonder how it feels to be on the receiving end of just a small taste of it.

Keep looking over your shoulder, Potter.

Sirius Black"

Harry handed the note back to Amelia. "He thinks it's my fault."

"He's just trying to upset you," Amelia said, pocketing the note.

"Well, he's succeeding," Harry said miserably. "I feel so bad about what's happened."

"Harry, please stop blaming yourself. No-one else does, especially not your friends." Minerva tried to comfort him by hugging him.

Harry briefly returned the embrace. "But I think it is my fault, and this happened because my friends are exactly that, my friends. And because they know me, they have lost their parents and their homes. Luna has no-one except a bunch of cousins she doesn't really know; Hermione and her mother can't return home because it might not be safe; and Justin's mum lost her husband and her staff, and they couldn't even return home if they wanted to as they can't even remember where they live. Where are they going to go now?"

Minerva hadn't been involved in the logistical side of what would happen to those affected by the attacks. "I don't know, Harry."

"They will be offered safe houses in the Muggle world to live in until we can arrange for them to purchase new homes," Amelia interjected.

"That's going to be tough on them, especially Justin and his Mum," Harry murmured, and he mulled over the situation as he sipped his drink. "Could I offer to let them stay at one of my houses?"

Amelia and Minerva shared a glance, Amelia nodding. "It would certainly take a lot of stress off my shoulders, but where do you think would be best?"

"Potter Place in Grimmauld Square," Minerva immediately suggested, well aware of all of the homes that were included in Harry's inheritance. "Harry cannot take ownership of the main estate house until he turns seventeen, but Potter Place is not only big enough to house everyone, it also has wards dating back centuries, making it one of the safest place in the country. And if he wants to make the offer, as his guardian I'll need to go to Gringotts Bank to set up the paperwork."

Without hesitation, Harry declared that he did want to make the offer. "I would appreciate it." And while they were on the subject of houses, he brought up a point that was bothering him. "Why do you suppose that Black took Justin's house?"

"We don't know that he did for certain," Minerva reminded Harry. "No-one remembers the house or can find any paperwork relating to Justin's address, but we all know that Justin and Mrs. Finch-Fletchley must have lived somewhere, and so I suspect that Black has invoked a Fidelius charm on the house to hide it."

"Like the one my parents used?" Harry asked.

"Exactly." Minerva could see that Amelia wanted to say something. "You know something different?"

"No," Amelia shook her head. "But I do believe that I know why Black took the house." When both Minerva and Harry looked at her in askance, she explained what she had done. "Just like Harry and most members of the wizarding aristocracy, Black owns several properties, including the one in Grimmauld Place. But when

Lestrangle escaped – she's a member of the Black family - I took the precaution of warding all of them, meaning that neither she nor anyone else in the Black family could access any of them." Amelia had had to fight long and hard with Gringotts to be allowed to do so, the house forming part of the Black estate which had fallen into their care upon Sirius' arrest. "I'm glad I did because the wards were tripped in September, but unfortunately no-one was found."

"So instead he plotted to attack me and my friends for revenge!" Harry found he was now angry - he had run the gamut of emotions during the previous day and overnight.

Amelia could see how annoyed Harry was. "I have to be honest. I expected him to make some sort of move earlier than this but I didn't expect it to be against your friends."

"I suppose my resurrection pushed him into action," Harry said, again blaming himself, and tiredly shaking his head. "Why me?"

Amelia looked at Minerva over Harry's head, but Minerva firmly shook her head in a silent response to unspoken question. Deciding that Harry had come to the end of his reserves, Minerva pulled Harry to his feet. "You're exhausted. Go lie down in my room. I'm going to walk Amelia out."

Harry bid Amelia goodbye and did as Minerva said, falling asleep within moments of his head touching the pillow. Only when he awoke did Minerva pass on the news that he was leaving Hogwarts for a short time. "I've been to Gringotts, and they have released Potter Place to me. Once you're packed, you will be leaving to stay there for the next two weeks. Professors Lupin and Viking will be accompanying you. I'd like to go, but I really cannot be spared as I am needed here to take up the slack."

Harry totally understood that Minerva could not go, but he was surprised that he was being allowed to leave. "Why am I going?"

"Any student who loses a relative, even one like Vernon Dursley, has to be allowed time away from school to grieve," Minerva explained the rules. "In your case, it will be more about supporting your friends, than anything else."

The next two weeks turned out to be a tough time for Harry and his friends. While Harry had attended both the Lovegood and Finch-Fletchley funerals, which had both had a large guard in attendance, he had demurred from attending the Granger funeral. Having spoken to Virginia several times, Harry suspected that she did not like him, and not wanting to cause trouble, Harry had refused when Hermione had asked.

Potter Place

With only two days left until the children were to return to school, Virginia called Hermione up to the room she had been placed in. "Sit down."

Hermione had never seen her mother look so nervous. "What's up?"

"There's no easy way to say this," Virginia sat down next to Hermione. "but I've decided to leave the country."

"But what about Harry's offer to stay here?" Hermione immediately brought up the proposal Harry had made after all the funerals had been carried out.

"I'm a Muggle, Hermione," Virginia spoke in a resigned voice. "And as such, I don't like this house. Everything is geared towards magical people like you and Harry, and I'm simply not comfortable in it. I've therefore put our house and my business up for sale. The agent thinks that they will sell quite quickly."

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked in shock.

"To Sydney to stay with Jessica," Virginia brought up the name of her sister. "She's going to help me find somewhere to live, and then I can look for somewhere to start a practice."

Hermione struggled to hold back her tears. It had been hard enough losing her father, and now it looked as though she was going lose her mother as well. "But what about me?"

"Albus is going to arrange for our visa applications to be pushed through, and he's also offered to make enquiries of the local magical

school for you." Virginia crossed her fingers hoping that Hermione would jump at the chance of a fresh start.

She didn't. "I don't want to leave Hogwarts and my friends."

"It's because of Hogwarts and your friend that we're in this position at all," Virginia observed.

"You talking about Harry, aren't you?" Hermione challenged her mother.

"Yes." Virginia didn't like him, and so did not bother to hide her feelings.

Something that Hermione had already picked up on, and feeling differently, she went on to defend her friend. "It isn't Harry's fault that this happened."

"I think it is." Virginia reached into her pocket and took out a cigarette; she had started smoking again a day after she had been attacked. "If you hadn't been his friend, then Lester would still be alive."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at smell of smoke. "That's not fair. You and Daddy might still have been targeted just because I'm a Muggleborn."

"I think it's very fair, and I want, no, I'm telling you, that you're going to Australia." Virginia could not bear to leave Hermione behind.

Hermione's face fell. "But I don't want to go to Australia. What about George?"

"George is welcome to visit any time he likes," Virginia said, liking the Weasley boy.

"And what about my friends?" Hermione protested. "I don't want to leave them or Hogwarts."

"I'm your mother, and you're underage, and you will abide by my rules," Virginia said firmly, her hand shaking slightly as she drew on the cigarette. "And mentioning your friends, I don't want you anywhere near that boy; he's not safe."

It was the wrong approach to take, and an already stressed and upset Hermione immediately went on the defensive. "If you make me go to Australia, and try to stop me from being friends with Harry, then the day I turn sixteen, I will pack, come back to England, and never step foot in Australia in again."

"I'd like to see you try," Virginia snapped, her nerves and temper close to fraying.

"I can do magic. Remember?" Hermione snapped back, flourishing her wand as she angrily got to her feet. "So Mummy, how do you intend to stop me?"

Virginia had no answer, so instead she chose to ignore the problem. "You will change your mind once you're there. Now I want you to go to your room and pack. We are leaving tomorrow."

"I'm not going," Hermione refused pointblank.

"You will go if I have to drug you and carry you out," Virginia threatened.

Instead of answering, Hermione simply burst into tears and fled out of the room, Virginia dropping her face into her hands in dismay. She had expected a little resistance from Hermione, but not for her to defy Virginia outright.

Harry reached out to steady Hermione as she ran full pelt into him. "What's wrong?"

Hermione could not get her words out for crying, and so Harry led her into his bedroom where Luna was lying on his bed reading. Alarmed, she dropped the book and scrambled off the bed. "What's up?"

"I don't know," Harry tugged an unprotesting Hermione onto his lap, Luna moving to sit beside him. "She's crying too hard to say anything."

After a short time, Hermione gained enough control over her emotions to tell Harry and Luna what was wrong. When she had

finished, she buried her head in Harry's neck again, Luna rubbing her back. Harry glanced at Luna. "I don't know what to suggest."

"You can't do anything," Hermione sniffled. "Only I can."

Harry could feel Hermione's tears running down his neck as he spoke. "Hermione, I think both you and your Mum are upset right now, and that you're both not thinking clearly."

Luna had a different idea. "I don't know, Harry. It might not be that; perhaps they are both being bugged by Wrackspurts."

Despite of her misery, Hermione gave a wet giggle. "I like Luna's idea better."

Harry let Hermione slip off his lap when she indicated she wanted to move. "Do you think she'll change her mind?"

"She's usually pretty understanding." Hermione was by now calming down, and starting to think a little more clearly. "When Daddy didn't want me to return to Hogwarts at Christmas, Mummy was the one who supported my decision. But after what happened to her in her surgery, I think she's terrified it might happen again, and that's why she's running away." Hermione got to her feet. "Perhaps I'd better go back, and talk to her. Maybe she'll come around."

"Why don't you give her some time to calm down?" Harry suggested. "Stay here with Luna and me. We're sort of looking at schoolwork. Well, it's not exactly schoolwork - Luna nicked some advanced books from my library."

Still afraid that her mother would blow up again if she returned so soon, Hermione decided to go with Harry's suggestion and wait a little while for things to calm down. That and she couldn't resist the carrot Harry was dangling, and so she joined both him and Luna on the massive four poster bed, curling up with a book on defense that was far in advance of what she should be learning. Soon though, her eyes began to droop, and she dropped the book.

Virginia had been worried sick when she had been unable to find Hermione after their argument, and after searching the house, she had turned to Remus for help to find her: Cordelia, Lucy, and Justin all having gone out. Her relief was tenfold when Remus opened

Harry's door to find Hermione curled up to Harry's back, and Harry curled up to Luna. But then anger at Harry and his being in bed with her daughter overrode everything, and Virginia tried to barge in.

However, Remus stopped her. "It's perfectly innocent. Luna is always in here, and so is Hermione when she's not with you."

Virginia didn't want to listen to Remus. "I want her out of that room."

"They're exhausted, Virginia, and they need the sleep." Remus was well aware that none of the children were sleeping well at night, having heard them pacing up and down, and making frequent trips downstairs, and, in Luna's case, into Harry's room when she did not want to wake Hermione up after her nightmares.

"But they're in bed together," Virginia bristled.

"They're surrounded by books, fully clothed, and lying on top of the bed – they were obviously reading and fell asleep," Remus deduced quite correctly. "And I think you should leave them be. It's time they got some sleep." When Virginia relented, Remus took her downstairs. "You seem pretty upset. Do you want to talk?"

Virginia blew her nose and told Remus what had happened, ending up in tears by the end of it. "I told Hermione about the move to Sydney, and I also told her she was coming with me. She didn't like it, and so she stormed off in tears. I should have known she'd go to him."

Remus detected distinct dislike coming from Virginia when she said 'him'. "You do realize that none of this is Harry's fault. Black is entirely responsible for what happened to everyone."

"But..." Virginia tried to argue.

However, Remus was not going to stand by and let Harry take the blame for something he could not help happening. "I understand that what happened to you was traumatic, and I'm sorry. No woman should ever have to experience something like that."

"But it's not the attempt that that animal made on me that is the problem," Virginia butted in before Remus could make his point. "I will eventually get over that. My problem is that, no matter what

happens now, I can't bring back Lester. And if Hermione had not been friends with that boy, then none of this would have happened, and she would still have a father."

Remus could not deny that what Virginia was saying was true. "That maybe so, but it still doesn't make it Harry's fault. And Hermione is not the only one who has lost a parent because of Black. Harry has as well – in fact he lost both of his parents and a sibling because him, and..."

He didn't get much further as Virginia interrupted, tears still running down her cheeks. "He lost a sibling?"

"Yes," Remus passed Virginia another handkerchief, before continuing. "A brother called Jamie. He was also my godson."

"I didn't know. I'm so sorry." Virginia had known that Harry's parents had died when Voldemort had attacked but not that Sirius was supposed to be responsible, or that Harry had had a brother. "What happened?"

Remus began to explain. "Harry's family was protected by a spell known as the Fidelius but it needs a secret keeper; someone who keeps the secret of where the house is hidden. Black was their keeper but he shared the secret with You-Know-Who. Subsequently You-Know-Who used this information to attack the house, and James, Lily, and baby Jamie all perished, leaving Harry without a loving family to care for him."

"You're trying to tell me that Black's betrayal this time is no more Harry's fault than it was then, aren't you?" Virginia had easily latched onto what Remus was trying to get across.

"I am," Remus said softly. "Virginia, you have been through a terrible time, but in no way is it Harry's fault. But that's not what is at issue here, it's Hermione. She shouldn't be penalized because you want to start afresh. I wholly understand why you want to take her with you but I also believe that you won't be happy if Hermione is unhappy."

Virginia swiped at the tears that didn't seem to want to abate. "I just want to take her somewhere safe."

"I know but even there, you can't protect her all the time." Remus reached out and took Virginia's hand. "And while you know that you can force Hermione to go with you, it would be the wrong decision."

Deep down Virginia knew that Remus was right, and she finally admitted as much. "After what happened to me, I needed to blame someone and that someone was the wrong person. Which meant that I also didn't want to take Hermione's feelings into account as I knew what she would say. I hated it when Lester did that, and now I've done the same thing." Virginia realized that she would need to talk more rationally with Hermione, and so she asked Remus for a favor. "When Hermione wakes, will you ask her if she could come to my room?" When Remus agreed that he would, Virginia stood up. "I think I need a little time to myself now. Please excuse me."

Remus politely stood up as Virginia left the room. He had the feeling that when she spoke to Hermione again, she would be more amenable towards her daughter's feelings. A short time later, he heard the front door open.

Cordelia was smiling widely as she entered the sitting room. "Remus, we got it."

Justin, who looked much better than he had a week ago, grinned and held out a certificate. "I'm going to have a sister."

Not wanting to miss out, Lucy held out a box. "Not quite as exciting as their news, and it still isn't really mine to tell. But look - Cordelia has a wand."

"It's only a trainer wand," Cordelia pointed out.

A trainer wand was more often than not used by small children to tap the square metal plates that operated things such as the shower and the like. And luckily for Cordelia, it had been determined that even though she was a squib, she still had enough power to use such a wand.

Cordelia took the box from Lucy, and took her ash and dragon heartstring wand out. As she waved it through the air, it was obvious to everyone there how excited Cordelia was, despite the wand's limitations. "I was surprised to find that they look just everyone else's wand."

"That's because squibs have no wish to stand out, even if they and their wands are only capable of doing the more mundane things," Lucy reminded her of what Ollivander had said.

"I know, but it's good to know that I have enough power to do at least that," Cordelia said, placing the wand in the holster that she had also bought.

Justin again bubbled up. "When Mum was being tested to see if she would be magically strong enough, I got to see how powerful I am as well."

Remus had to smile at Justin's delight; the boy had been understandably morose for most of the fortnight, and so it was good to see a marked change in him. "And what did it say?"

"One hundred and seventy-eight." Justin had been rather pleased with the reading, especially as he had been told that it would still continue to rise. "Mum was an eighteen, which is top of the scale for a squib."

"That's why you were able to apparate to safety then," Remus said.

"I was very lucky," Cordelia said, and, changing the subject, she held up the certificate. "On to more important things. Lucy suggested that to cheer everyone up, and to hopefully celebrate this, we should go out to dinner tonight."

"I doubt Hermione and Virginia will be going," Remus said before filling the group in on what had happened.

Cordelia felt sorry for Hermione. "I'm always willing to take care of her. I told Virginia as much when she first told me about her plans."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to take you up on your offer," Remus told her. "But I think we should wait until she's spoken with Hermione before offering again."

Cordelia agreed with Remus. "I agree. Now, let's go and tell Luna about what I've done."

"Can I do it?" Justin asked, wanting to cheer his friend up as well, because even though he had lost his father, it had not affected him as badly as losing Xenophilius had to Luna – he at least still had his mother.

"Let's all do it," Remus suggested. He too wanted to see Luna's reaction.

So they all traipsed upstairs and into Harry's room. Justin's mouth fell open at the sight of his friend. "I always said he was a girl magnet."

Remus' mouth twitched in amusement. The little group had shifted since he and Virginia had come into the room. Now Harry had his arm wrapped around Hermione's back, and she had turned to face him, burying her face in his neck. Luna too was curled up tightly against Harry, her arm looping over him, leaving her hand resting lightly on Hermione's hip. Remus couldn't resist, and he coughed quite loudly.

Neither Hermione nor Harry stirred, but Luna opened her eyes to find everyone looking at her. Nudging Harry, she sat up. "Harry, wake up."

Harry didn't open his eyes; he was too comfortable, and he blearily asked, "What's up?"

"We're being watched." Luna showed no embarrassment, however, despite her words. "Hi, Professor."

"I keep telling you that you can call me Remus out of school," Remus said lightly.

It was hearing Remus' voice that aroused Harry out of his sleepy demeanor, and he realized the position he was in. Sitting bolt upright, he began to make excuses. "This isn't how it looks."

Remus' more evil streak surfaced, and he couldn't resist teasing Harry. "It looks to me as though you have two young women in your bed."

Hermione had by now also woken up, and she too began to excuse their behavior. "Harry's right, it isn't how it looks. Harry is just a friend, and..."

Remus began to laugh. "Calm down. I'm just teasing."

Justin also laughed. "I bet you were sweating it."

"Get lost," Harry barked at his friend, his face stained red. "We were just reading and fell asleep."

"I already know that," Remus revealed. "Virginia and I came in and found you like this earlier."

Hermione's face paled. "She's going to kill me."

Remus smiled at the girl. "Hermione, it's quite alright. Your mother knows that this is entirely innocent. We had a little talk, and I believe that she's feeling a little more amenable towards hearing what you have to say."

Hermione's face lit up. "Really?"

"Really. In fact, she said that she wanted to see you when you woke up," Remus passed on Virginia's message. "She's in her room." He smiled as Hermione shot out of the room. "And we have some other good news."

Justin jumped onto the bed, just as a child would, his excitement showing in his face. "Luna, you can stay here."

Luna blinked several times in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Let me explain," Cordelia said, as she sat down and took Luna's hand. "You know that your father always wanted you to live in a magical home with a magical family if anything happened to him?"

Luna had been there at the reading of the Will, and she therefore indicated that she did. "Yes, that's why I'm supposed to go to Ireland and live with my cousins."

"You don't want that though, do you?" Cordelia softly asked.

"No." Luna wanted to stay with Harry, who she had turned to to be her anchor during the traumatic two weeks following her father's death.

"Well, I didn't want to say anything before now, just in case I couldn't make it happen." Cordelia held out her hand to Justin, who passed her the certificate he had grabbed on the way up the stairs. "But, it turns out that even though I'm squib, I count as being magical, and so, if you want to, but only if you want to, I'm going to adopt you. That's what this is – a magical order from the Children's Court in the Ministry of Magic."

"But you hardly know me," Luna breathed in disbelief as she shakily took the certificate from Cordelia to look at it.

"I know you well enough to know that you don't deserve what you're going through, that Justin and Harry both love you like a sister, and that I would have no problem loving you like a daughter." Cordelia held out her arms. "What do you think?"

Luna burst into tears and hurled herself into Cordelia's arms, the certificate being crushed between them. "I've been so scared."

"I know, angel." Cordelia stroked her hair.

"Daddy called me that," Luna sobbed into Cordelia's shoulder.

Cordelia kissed Luna's head. "That's because you look like an angel."

Luna now couldn't speak as she was crying as heavily as Hermione had been earlier. When she eventually stopped, she was hugged in turn by everyone in the room, and then she was told that she had to sign the certificate to make it official. "How did you do this so quickly? I thought this sort of thing took ages."

"It helps to know the Head of the Wizengamot," Lucy handed her a quill. "All you have to do is to sign there, and you'll become part of Cordelia's family."

Luna hesitated. "What about my name?"

"Luna Lovegood Finch-Fletchley is a bit of a mouthful," Cordelia said, smiling, "so I made provision for you to become Luna Graham-Lovegood – Graham is my maiden name, and I'm going to be reverting back to it eventually."

"I like that." Luna signed her new name with a flourish, and gave a scream of delight. "I don't have to move to Ireland!"

Cordelia glanced at Harry. "You do realize that your offer to let me stay here will have to continue until Luna turns seventeen?"

"I don't care." Harry was almost bowled over by Luna in her excitement. "You can all stay as long as you want to." He looked up at Remus. "You too. Amelia told me last night that your flat was burnt down as well. I just haven't had a chance to speak to you about it yet, and now seemed a good time."

"I didn't want to burden you with that," Remus answered, more than a little annoyed that Amelia had let the cat out of the bag. "It was just a Muggle rental, anyway."

"It doesn't matter," Harry smiled at the teacher. "You can stay here until you sort something out. Dad would have wanted you to."

"Thank you," Remus had told Harry all about his connections with James and Lily, but had deliberately omitted mentioning that he had been Jamie's godfather, not wanting to have to explain to Harry about Sirius.

Lucy beamed at Remus in delight. "So, I guess that makes us one big happy family. I'm going to be staying here until my new house is built."

Cordelia brought up Lucy's earlier suggestion again. "Given that this is worth celebrating, as Lucy suggested earlier, I think we should go out to dinner. What does everyone think?"

The children were all fed up of feeling miserable and readily agreed.

What was even better was that, although Virginia had declined to go to dinner and Hermione had stayed with her, Hermione had good news for the group when they returned. She revealed that although she was to spend most of her summer holidays in Sydney, at least

for this year anyway, she had agreed with her mother that she should remain at Hogwarts, and during the shorter holidays, if Cordelia and Harry were amicable to the idea, she would stay with them. Both were, and it was a much happier Hermione who went to bed that night. And for the first time in two weeks, Harry found himself alone, as Luna slept nightmare free, and did not need to turn to him for comfort.

France

However, there were few celebrations in France. Voldemort put down the newspaper he had been perusing, having followed all the reports of the attacks that Sirius had purportedly carried out. "So no-one has been able to find Black after he attacked Potter and his friends. I still find myself wondering why he would do such a thing."

"Azkaban probably sent him mad," Bellatrix suggested, still having bouts of insanity herself.

"That may be so, but we both know he had nothing to with my Death Eaters or me, but for some reason he's using facsimiles of them to help in the attacks he carried out." Voldemort rubbed his chin. "I think it's time I returned to England, and discovered exactly what was going on."

"But you're too weak, my Lord," Bellatrix protested. She had been feeding Voldemort continually, and it was only now that he was finally getting strong enough to begin to contemplate the ritual which would restore him to full strength.

Voldemort went to snap at her, but stopped. He had to admit to himself that he still tired easily, and a trip to England might drain him dry. He therefore held back. "Then we find an alternative. Contact Longbottom and tell him I want blood from either Dumbledore or Potter. And make sure he knows that it must be taken by force using the Knife of Resurrection you will be sending him."

"I doubt anyone will get close to either of them at the moment, not even Longbottom," Bellatrix sensibly pointed out. "Perhaps we should wait a little longer."

Frustrated, but also cognizant that he was in the untenable position of being able to do anything about the problem, Voldemort scowled and gave in. "We will wait a few more weeks for things to die down, and then have Longbottom make his attempt."

Bellatrix was not exactly right about Neville not being able to get close to Harry. As a result of what had happened, Harry and his friends had banded together, all feeling closer to each other than ever before. Ron too had become a more integral part of the group because Susan and Ron had started dating during the two weeks Harry and the others had been away. This had therefore put Neville in much closer contact to Harry, which would make the job of acquiring the blood he was going to be asked to procure that much easier. However, despite Voldemort's hope, it would be far longer than he would have liked before Neville achieved his goal.

And so it was not Neville or even Sirius Black that was to cause Harry's next problem, it was the security that Cornelius Fudge had set in place. After the attacks, security around the school was upgraded, and Cornelius Fudge had decided that those steps involved using Dementors. And it was during a bit of fun that Harry discovered he didn't react well when in close contact with them.

March 17th 1995

Lucy laughed as she raced Harry on her Firebolt. "You'll never keep up."

"Cheater," Harry laughed, and he pulled a snitch out of his pocket. "I bet I can beat you to this though."

Justin swooped in under them. "I have a great idea. We'll keep releasing it until only one person remains. The loser buys Butterbeer for everyone when they finally let us go back into Hogsmeade."

"You're on," Lucy agreed.

Harry let go of the snitch and it quickly disappeared. "I can almost taste that Butterbeer now."

Hannah, who was now finally confident enough to fly alone, shook her head. "It's time someone took you down, Potter."

"Perhaps," Harry answered a little too self-assuredly. "But it isn't going to be you."

Luna giggled. "It's going to be me."

"Dream on, Luna Graham-Lovegood," Harry yelled out.

On the ground, Hermione snuggled closer to George, a smile on her face at the delighted look Luna gave when Harry used her new surname. "Why aren't you up there?"

"Because I'd rather be keeping my girlfriend warm," George responded. He had missed Hermione during the time she had been away from Hogwarts - he had only been able to leave school to attend Lester's funeral, wanting to support Hermione then.

Ron dove towards the stands, waving at Susan, who was sitting with Neville. George looked up as he heard a whirring noise go over his head. "I think the chase is on." He was right, and Ron followed the sound.

The same noise alerted Harry and Lucy that the snitch had reappeared, and with a grin, Lucy overtook Ron to shoot off into the clouds. "You're so going to lose, Harry."

Harry, Justin and the others, all shot upwards on Lucy's tail, and Harry's acute hearing soon picked the whirring sound back up. Not seeing Lucy in the clouds, he relied on his instincts, and headed towards the noise. His fingers had barely closed around the snitch when a cold sensation made him tremble. It intensified, and within moments, Harry was shivering uncontrollably on his broomstick. And just before blackness overcame him, Harry could have sworn he heard a woman pleading.

Lucy luckily saw what was happening, and cast the Patronus charm, driving off the Dementor that was attacking Harry. Justin managed to grab Harry before he could fall, but he was having trouble holding onto him as Harry was screaming and struggling. "Ron, stun him."

Ron did as Justin yelled, and Harry went limp in Justin's arms. "What was that?"

"He was begging me to stop her crying," Justin revealed as he and Ron both wedged an unconscious Harry between them, so that they could get him and his broomstick safely down on the ground. "I don't know what he was going on about."

When Harry came to, Lucy was holding him. "Harry, come on, wake up."

"I'm alright." Harry tried to get up but dizziness overcame him, and he lay back down. "What happened?"

"You ran into a Dementor," Lucy stroked Harry's hair. "Luckily the clouds parted and I spotted it."

"She was brilliant," Justin, who was also kneeling at Harry's side, informed Harry. "She made a shiny bird and it flew at it."

"It's called a Patronus," Lucy told Justin the correct name for the shiny bird. "I'm just glad I'm capable of producing one. Not everyone can."

Hermione decided there and then she wanted to learn how to cast the spell. But she got no chance to ask Lucy about it as Minerva quickly joined them, George having borrowed a broom to fly back to the school and alert them to what had happened.

Minerva stood over Harry. "Harry, are you okay now?"

"I think so," Harry told her as Lucy and Justin finally got him to his feet. "I fainted."

"He didn't just faint. He was attacked by a Dementor which caused him to pass out," Lucy told her. "But even so, he was yelling and fighting about a woman crying."

"Dementors make you relive your worst nightmares," Minerva said out loud, more for the other children's benefits, than for Lucy's. "Perhaps this happened to Harry."

Remus, who had also made the journey to the field, had the sneaking suspicion he knew what it might be. "Perhaps he's remembering the night his parents were attacked. Lily was found right by him."

Harry shivered. "I don't remember any of it but I do feel cold."

Remus pulled out some chocolate from his pocket. "I know you don't like it but it's what Madam Pomfrey will give you as an antidote if I don't."

Harry pulled a face but unlike previously it wasn't suspicion directed at Remus. Now it was a pure dislike of chocolate, even though he still liked to drink it in its milky liquid form. Lucy took the chocolate from Remus. "Just eat it, Harry."

Somewhat reluctantly, Harry took the chocolate and tentatively nibbled on it. As he did so, warmth began to spread through his chilled limbs and he began to eat it with a little more enthusiasm. "Why did it attack me?"

"I don't know," Minerva was more than a little disturbed by what had happened, and had every intention of filing a complaint at the Ministry on Harry's behalf. "It shouldn't have been inside the school grounds."

Harry glanced at Remus. "Can I defend against them? I don't want something like that happening again."

Remus looked somewhat embarrassed. "You can defend against them but I'm unable to conjure one up myself."

"I'll teach you, Harry," Lucy offered. "But I don't know where I'm going to get a Dementor to practice on. It's far too dangerous."

"Can you teach it to me as well?" Hermione jumped in quickly with her question.

"I'm willing to help anyone who needs help." Lucy didn't mind teaching more than just Harry. "But I still have the problem of not having a Dementor to practice on. It isn't necessary but I think it would make things move far more quickly."

This was something Remus could help with. "I may have a solution."

It turned out that Remus' solution was a boggart, which he hoped would turn into a Dementor for Harry. Unfortunately it turned out that Harry still appeared to be more frightened of his aunt than he was of the Dementors. "I'm sorry, Harry. I hoped you would be terrified of Dementors after what happened."

"This will work just as well," Lucy decided. "Harry, you're going to create a Patronus to use against your aunt. Everyone else can use whatever frightens them the most."

This cheered Harry up immensely, and he began to practice in earnest. And just two days before the Easter holiday, he finally succeeded in conjuring a Patronus. "It's a dragon!"

"I think Charlie might have something to do with it," Lucy smiled as she watched the dragon fly through the air. "He makes you feel safe, and this is demonstrated by your Patronus."

Hermione was rather disappointed. "I thought I might have beaten Harry."

"Brains have nothing to do with being able to cast a Patronus," Lucy informed her, knowing only too well why Hermione had expected to be first. "It's more to do with how you feel. You need to pull your Patronus from within you."

Despite Lucy's help, Hermione still failed, and when the train departed for the Easter holiday, she still had not succeeded in her attempts.

Next Chapter: Cordelia and Remus grow closer; Lucy has a disappointing trip to Romania; Hermione is unsettled in her relationship with George.

Note: Sorry for the delay but I've been on vacation in Orlando. The next chapter should be up in the New Year. In the meantime, I'd like to take the opportunity to wish everyone who reads this a Happy Holiday and a Prosperous and Healthy New Year!

Chapter 42: Strangers in the Night

14 April 1995

Cordelia had spent the first week of the holidays alone at Potter Place with Remus: Justin was staying with Hannah's family; Harry was at BritAD and staying with the Tonks family until the weekend; Luna, Hermione, and Susan had gone to stay with the Weasleys – Ginny was staying at school to continue her scholarship, otherwise Luna would have refused to go to the Burrow – and Lucy was in Romania with Charlie. So Cordelia was sitting by herself reading when Remus walked into the elegant Chippendale strewn drawing room. Putting down her book, Cordelia could see almost immediately that he seemed to be on edge. "Are you alright?"

"I need some fresh air," Remus said, his Muggle style jacket clutched tightly in his hand. "Would you like to come for a walk?"

"Why not?" Cordelia got up, and after going to the hall closet, grabbed her own jacket. "Let's head for Hyde Park."

Before she could open the front door, Remus took her arm and apparated them out. Cordelia scowled. "I was thinking of walking, and this isn't Hyde Park."

"No, it's not." Remus held out his arm for Cordelia to take. "It's Winterborne Zelston in Dorset. The weather is a little warmer here."

"I would have liked to have had a little notice – you know I don't like apparition that much," Cordelia grumbled a little, taking Remus' arm.

"My apologies," Remus said, feeling somewhat guilty. Cordelia rarely complained about anything, but he knew she truly hated apparition. However it had been the quickest way to get where he wanted to go, and now that they were there, he led the way into a small pub called the General Allenby. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"I thought we were getting some fresh air," Cordelia commented but even as she spoke she was shedding her coat, the idea of a glass of wine very appealing.

"I need to talk to you about something important, and I prefer to do it sitting down," Remus answered, and he then headed up to the bar, returning with a pint of beer for himself and a large glass of white wine for Cordelia.

Cordelia thanked him before querying what he wanted. "So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Me," Remus said cryptically. Then, after taking several large gulps of his beer, he looked around to make sure that they couldn't be overheard. "As we're living together in the same house, and, due to my financial circumstances, are likely to be doing so during the summer, I felt it was only fair that you, and eventually the children, should know about my condition."

"Condition?" Cordelia queried.

"I suffer from something that leaves me rather unwell once a month; well, once every full moon actually," Remus said, waiting for Cordelia to put two and two together. When she stared blankly at him, he continued. "I was hoping you'd guess, and that if you did, you wouldn't run out screaming."

"Why would I do that?" Cordelia asked in confusion.

"Because the last girl I told tried to kill me while screaming at the top of her lungs," Remus answered.

"I think you had better lay it out in black and white for me," Cordelia suggested, nervousness now assailing her.

"I change on the night of the full moon," Remus responded in a voice filled with apprehension. "And as you might know that's tomorrow night."

Trying to acclimatize herself to this new world she was now inhabiting, Cordelia had taken up reading as much material from Harry's library as she could. This had included several books on magical creatures, and out of those creatures, she could think of several species that changed as Remus had mentioned. "You're a were-animal of some sort?"

"A werewolf," Remus clarified, before looking at Cordelia in mild surprise when she showed no fear. "You don't seem that concerned."

"As you've just pointed out, it's not the night of the full moon until tomorrow," Cordelia responded in an unconcerned voice. "If it had been, and it had been after sunset, then I would have been worried."

"You'd have been dead," Remus said bluntly. "And don't think that werewolves are only dangerous on the night of the full moon – they're not. I could easily rip someone apart with my bare hands on any night of the year."

Cordelia recalled what she had read. "You're preternaturally strong, have excellent vision and hearing, and you're a lot faster than most people."

"I can also read people's emotions," Remus revealed, not entirely sure if the books Cordelia had been reading would have covered everything about werewolves.

"Is that why you took the chance to tell me in here?" Cordelia asked. "Because you could sense that I wouldn't be frightened?"

"Actually, except for the first time I met you, you've been hard to read," Remus had to admit. "It's odd, almost as if something is blocking me."

"So you took quite a chance by bringing me to a pub, didn't you?" Cordelia remarked.

"A little, but I could have simply stupefied you and said you had fainted." Remus lifted his arm revealing his wand poking out, and that this time he had been taking no chances. "Muggles would have no idea."

"That's very true," Cordelia commented. "But you could have told me in the house."

"I just felt the need to get out, particularly as I'll be locked away tomorrow," Remus answered. "And I really fancied a beer, and they do a good pint of homebrew in here."

"So you've been here before?" Cordelia asked as she looked around the quaint pub that had red velvet padded wooden benches and beams predominating its décor.

"Quite a few times," Remus smiled as he answered. "I used to live down the road. I moved there just after I left school - it was just a quick hop to University from here."

"Do your parents come from around here?" Cordelia asked, having no idea of Remus' background.

"No, we lived in London. But my father died when I was fifteen, and my mother remarried and now lives in France with her husband and my half-sister, Nicole." Remus gave a potted account of his family history. "What about your parents? Are they still alive?"

"Yes, but they haven't spoken to me since I found out I was pregnant with Justin," Cordelia answered, her voice slightly acrimonious. "Because they knew the baby I was expecting was the result of a one-night stand, they threw me out. Edmund offered to marry me and to treat Justin as his son and heir."

"Is that why you were unhappy in your marriage? Because it wasn't what you wanted?" Remus had noticed Cordelia had shed few tears over her husband's demise, and when she spoke his name there was no warmth in her voice.

"Yes. I despised Edmund but I would have done anything to keep Justin; something that wouldn't have been viable back then without Edmund's help," Cordelia responded, before letting Remus know something important. "And Justin has no idea by the way."

"What happened to his birth father?" Remus asked.

"He died." Cordelia's hand went to the locket and ring that sat around her neck, and she gave a rueful smile. "I like to think that if he hadn't, we could have made a go of things – I could have easily fallen in love with him but one night together didn't exactly give me the chance."

"I'm sorry," Remus commiserated with her.

"I was half-expecting you to disapprove of the fact that I'd had a one-night stand," Cordelia admitted. "Most people would."

"And, as the Muggles say, I would be a person living in a glass house and throwing stones," Remus responded. "I've had more than a few one night stands myself."

"Because of your condition?" Cordelia guessed.

"Yes, and because of how my former girlfriend acted when I told her." Remus took another mouthful of his beer, almost draining the glass. "Excuse me."

Cordelia had to wait until Remus returned from fetching another round of drinks to find out more. "So what happened with her?"

"I used to live down here because Julia lived close by." Remus revealed why he knew the area so well. "And once I'd finished University, I decided to ask her to marry me but up until then I hadn't had the courage to tell her about what I was. Unfortunately when I did, she was terrified and tried to use the killing curse on me."

"What did you do?" Cordelia couldn't help but be interested.

"I had to obliviate her, and then end the relationship," Remus said in a slightly saddened voice. "The worst thing was that she couldn't understand why I finished it, and I ended up hurting her."

"You did the only thing you could," Cordelia said, placing her hand over Remus'.

"After that I've pushed women away," Remus admitted, squeezing Cordelia's hand gently. "Well, up until now."

Cordelia had suspected that Remus was interested in her. "I could play it coy and ask who you are talking about but I don't think you're in the mood for games."

"I'm not," Remus confirmed. "And yes, I'm interested in you, which came as something of a surprise to me as I didn't really think I was ever going to find anyone I would trust enough to tell about me."

"Yet you plan to tell the children," Cordelia brought up Remus' earlier comment.

"It's Harry's house, and I believe it is only fair," Remus responded. "But I am nervous about telling them."

"Then only do it when you're ready," Cordelia suggested. "And get ready to obliviate them if they freak out."

Remus did not want to have to go those extremes, but he knew he might have to. "I'll be ready." He then turned the conversation back to Justin. "So apart from Edmund and your parents, who else knows about Justin?"

"Except for Lucy, just you," Cordelia said, before going on to reveal something that she suspected might surprise Remus. "But even she doesn't know that I now believe that Justin's father was a wizard."

"What makes you think that?" Remus asked.

"I obviously didn't know back then that I was a squib, and so I didn't realize that I'd stumbled upon what I now believe was a wizarding hotel - it certainly explains why the Muggle photographer I was waiting for couldn't find the place." Cordelia had been furious when he hadn't shown up. "As for Justin's birth father, I suspected he was from abroad - he had strange clothing, and even stranger looking money - but I'm pretty certain now that he was magical," Cordelia said, before taking a deep breath, and revealing her biggest suspicion. "But what I'm afraid of is that he might also have been a Death Eater."

Remus almost choked on his beer. "What?"

"He had an odd tattoo, but I've been too embarrassed to confide in Lucy about my suspicions," Cordelia said. "After what happened to her home, I know she's not entirely fond of Death Eaters right now."

"So why tell me?" Remus asked.

"Because I want a second opinion, and as you're a little older than Lucy and British, I'm hoping you might know who he is." Cordelia set out her reasons for telling Remus. "Not only that though. It's

because despite what's happened, you seem to have a levelheaded perspective on the whole situation."

"Thank you for the compliment." Remus leant back in his seat, a serious look adorning his face. "And I am willing to listen, but only tell me if this is what you really want."

"I do want to tell you," Cordelia responded, and then began her tale.

January 16th 1979

Cordelia checked her silver wristwatch for what felt like the hundredth time. Ricardo was very late, and she suspected, not coming. She was annoyed. Between them, she and her best friend, who owned the modeling agency Cordelia worked at, had spent two days finding the perfect spot; a spot Cordelia had found, and now her hard work would be for naught. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a dark-haired young man who had just come in and sat down at the bar, and upon catching his eye, she nodded politely before returning her attention to her glass of wine that was now almost empty.

She looked up when the bartender pushed a fresh glass of wine in front of her. "This is from the gentleman over there."

Cordelia had already guessed who it was going to be from, and she looked down the bar. "Tell him thank you, but I'm ready to leave."

The bartender returned down the bar and passed on her message as Cordelia started to pick up her purse to pay for the drink she had already consumed. She was halted as the young man who had sent the drink, joined her. "I have no wish to make you uncomfortable. I just wanted a little company."

Cordelia was used to men hitting on her, especially with that kind of line. And even though this slightly strangely dressed, but rather handsome young man was being politer than those men who usually tried to pick her up, she still brushed him off. "I'm sure you did."

"Please." The man reached out and grabbed her hand as she went to leave. "Just stay and talk. That's all I want."

Something in the man's eyes caught Cordelia's attention, and she found herself almost unwillingly sitting back down. Being a polite girl, she immediately introduced herself. "I'm Cordelia."

"That's a pretty name," the man responded, but he didn't give her his name.

"It's my professional name." Cordelia then blushed as she realized how that must sound. "I'm a model."

"I don't doubt it." Her new companion thought she was rather stunning. "So why are you sitting here alone?"

"I was waiting for my photographer to turn up but he let me down," Cordelia said as she absently picked up the fresh glass of wine and took a sip from it. It was only then that she realized it was champagne. "I should thank you for my drink."

"It's my pleasure, and I think I'll have some as well," the stranger said before he turned around and withdrew a beautifully embroidered velvet pouch. "Darius, a bottle of the same, and I will pay for the lady's drink that she has already had."

Cordelia frowned as the young man pulled out coins she struggled to recognize. Even though he seemed to have an English accent, she guessed from the strange currency, and his rather unusual garb, that he must be from abroad and not wanting to appear nosey, she said nothing about either of them. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to," the young man insisted and he slid across some of the coins to the bartender, who didn't bat an eyelid at them. "Please."

"If you're going to buy me drinks then I'd at least like to know your name," Cordelia demanded.

After a moment's hesitation, the young man answered, "It's Artie."

Cordelia had noticed his vacillation, and therefore asked, "That's not your real name, is it?"

"No," Artie lied, not wanting the complications of explaining who he really was. "But you've already said that Cordelia isn't really yours either."

"My real name is Delia Graham," Cordelia revealed. "My boss and best friend said it was hardly a suitable name for a model, and so she changed it to Cordelia."

"I think Cordelia suits you," Artie said, before abruptly changing the subject. "I'm hungry. Would you care to join me for dinner?"

"I really should be getting on," Cordelia checked the time as she spoke. "I don't want to be out alone after dark."

"Have dinner with me and I'll make sure you get home safely," Artie promised, before he turned to the bartender. "Can you have this bottle of champagne delivered to my table?"

Cordelia found herself being ushered into the hotel's dining room, which was fairly empty. "This was full on Saturday."

"I imagine it's like this all the time during the week." Artie pulled out a chair for her. "Please sit down."

"Thank you." Cordelia now had a chance to study Artie more closely. "You look very young."

"I'm just eighteen," Artie revealed his age. "But sometimes I feel far older."

"I know what you mean," Cordelia agreed with him, but didn't disclose her age.

"So, how old are you?" Artie knew it was rather cheeky of him, but he wanted to know. "Twenty-two, twenty-three?"

"I'm seventeen," Cordelia whispered as she glanced around, a little nervous that someone might have heard, especially as she was underage and drinking.

Artie was completely amazed. "You look and seem far older."

"And you look young, but act far older," Cordelia observed in return.

Artie's face darkened momentarily. "I had to grow up quickly." He gave Cordelia a tight smile and took a mouthful of the champagne that had been delivered to the table, before changing the subject. "So what do you think of this champagne?"

Cordelia took another sip before responding. "It's very nice, although I've never heard of Black Reserve before."

"What champagne do you usually drink?" Artie asked, topping up his own glass again.

"I usually don't drink at all," Cordelia confessed. "I just wanted to fit in, and so I asked for the nettle wine I saw another woman being bought. Luckily I liked the taste of it."

They were interrupted by a waiter, who took their order. After he had gone, Artie leant back in his chair. "Do you like your life?"

Cordelia was rather taken aback at the abruptness of the question. "That's a strange question."

"Please, just answer me," Artie begged.

Cordelia thought for a short time before answering. "I suppose I do. I have a nice home, parents who take good care of me, and a job I enjoy. How about you?"

"I had a good life." Artie frowned as he thought about how his life had turned out. "But then I ended up in the wrong crowd. At first I thought it was what I wanted, and then I learned things to make me regret my decision."

"And are you still part of that crowd?" Cordelia asked, a little worried about the type of person she might be fraternizing with.

"Yes, but that's all going to change tomorrow." Artie took a very long slug of his champagne.

"How?" Cordelia was intrigued.

"I'm going to do something that my parents will probably curse my name for; actually they'll probably curse it for evermore if they find out what I've done." Artie's voice was full of bitterness.

Cordelia's heart began to beat quickly. "You're not going to kill someone or something like that are you?"

Artie couldn't help but laugh. "I wish it were that simple, but I don't think it's going to be."

Cordelia was perplexed by Artie's cryptic comment. "I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either," Artie admitted, and he smiled at the waiter who had brought their soup. "Thank you."

Conversation lulled until they had both finished their meal, and Cordelia thanked Artie again, before agreeing to join him in the lounge, where he ordered more drinks for them. Cordelia sniffed hers suspiciously when it arrived. "What is this?"

"Transylvanian Bloodjuice," Artie said and knocked his back in one go.

"You're joking, aren't you?" Cordelia sniffed the drink again but couldn't detect what it was really made of.

"I am," Artie lied. "Go ahead. It's just juice."

Cordelia followed his example by swallowing the contents of the glass in one gulp, and her eyes widened at the tart but potent taste. "That was really good."

"Would you like another one?" Artie offered.

"No, thank you," Cordelia said as she glanced at the empty glass. "Somehow I think that that was more than just juice."

"It was but we'll stick to champagne if you prefer." Artie waved a waiter over, and he placed an order.

Cordelia nestled into the seat. "Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Only if you want me to," Artie teased, before turning solemn. "Thank you for talking to me tonight. I didn't want to go home, and I didn't want to be alone."

Cordelia sat up a little straighter at his comment, her curiosity piqued. "What are you going to do tomorrow? You say you're not going to kill someone but even so, it must be something serious."

"It is," Artie acknowledged.

"I presume though that it's against the law," Cordelia probed.

"Actually it's not, but it's also still not a good idea," Artie still wondered if he could really do it, "even though it is the right thing to do."

"Isn't doing the right thing always a good idea?" Cordelia contended.

"I suppose it is." Artie shook himself. "I'm sorry. I really am bringing this conversation down, aren't I?"

"Yes, but if you want to continue to talk about what's bothering you, then that's okay with me." Cordelia liked acting as his confidante.

"I'd like to tell you more but I can't." Artie took Cordelia's hand. "You're too lovely to be put in harm's way."

Cordelia looked down at where Artie had laced his fingers through hers, liking the feeling. "If it's something so bad, then why haven't you gone to the police?"

Artie frowned. "The what?"

"The police," Cordelia repeated. "Or at least gone to your parents."

Artie shook his head. "I can't go to the authorities or to my parents. The first would arrest me, and my parents would disown me."

"I don't understand." Cordelia was totally mystified. "How can the police arrest you for something you haven't done?"

"It's what I have done already that matters," Artie confessed.

"Then go to your parents," Cordelia urged. "Tell them what you've done."

Artie wished it could be that simple. "My parents already know what I've done."

Cordelia's confusion only deepened. "So why would they disown you over what you're going to do, if they already know what you've done so far?"

"They just would." Artie didn't want to go into it, and he dropped his head. "I've made such a mess of my life, Cordelia."

"There's still time to put it right," Cordelia said as she squeezed his hand. "I can help you if you want me to."

"There's nothing you, or anyone else can do." Artie lifted his head to reveal that his eyes were damp. "I've done some appalling things, and this is my way of trying to atone for some of it."

"I really don't understand," Cordelia murmured. "You seem so nice but if I believed what you're saying, it would mean that you're not. And I can't believe that you aren't a good person."

"If you knew the real me, you wouldn't be saying that," Artie said softly. "And I think I should get you home now."

Cordelia shook her head. "You said yourself you didn't want to be alone, and my parents aren't expecting me home until tomorrow afternoon. My boss has arranged for me to stay with another model in London, so I can sit and talk if you want me to."

Artie picked up the bottle of champagne. "Do you mind if we talk in my room?" Cordelia's eyes widened, and Artie immediately reassured her. "I'm not going to take advantage of you."

Cordelia didn't know why but she trusted him despite what he had just intimated about himself. "Okay then."

When they reached the bedroom, Cordelia looked around in amazement at the tapestries that adorned the bedroom wall, as well as the four poster bed that sat in the middle of the room. "Anyone would think that we'd stepped back in time."

Artie didn't see it. "It's just like most of the hotel rooms I've stayed in."

"You must stay in some old places," Cordelia said and glanced at the door. "Is the bathroom any more modern?"

"It has running water and a toilet, if that's what you mean," Artie said and led the way in. "See?"

Cordelia smiled at the plumbing, which although antiquated, was what she was used to. "Thanks. I can take it from here." Artie was sitting by the fireplace, staring into the flames when she returned. "Did you make up the fire?"

"Yes," Artie said and patted the seat next to him. "The room was a little chilly."

"I didn't notice," Cordelia had to admit and she sat down. "So what do you want to talk about?"

"How about you?" Artie wanted to know more about her. "Tell me about your family, and what it was like growing up."

So Cordelia told him about her family's annual trips to France, her school, her school friends, and her life in the Gloucestershire countryside. She also told him about her decision not to go to university despite her parents' objections; the reason being that in spite of her young age, her best friend, Denise, had decided to take over the modeling agency her recently deceased parents had left behind, encouraging Cordelia to become a model for her, and Cordelia had loved it. But eventually she finished speaking. "That's just about it."

"You have no idea how lucky you are," Artie responded as he emptied the last of the champagne into Cordelia's glass. "To live in a world where everything is so simple."

"You live in the same world," Cordelia pointed out.

"No, I don't," Artie shook his head. "My world is full of darkness, despair, and prejudice, and it's not a nice place to be in."

"Then leave it." Cordelia placed a hand on Artie's arm. "Whatever sordid world you seem to have gotten into, leave it."

"I cannot," Artie said in a sorrow-filled voice, and he took Cordelia's hand in his own yet again. "No more than you can leave your world."

"But I like the world I live in." Cordelia could feel Artie shaking, and she twisted her hand around, linking her fingers with his. "Artie, you obviously don't like your life, and whatever you're planning to do tomorrow, it really scares you, doesn't it?"

"I'm terrified actually." Artie hadn't realized until that moment how truly frightened he was, and how much he had needed to talk to someone about what he was planning to do; not that he could be entirely honest but just telling Cordelia as much as he had had helped.

"Please tell me what it is," Cordelia beseeched him. "Perhaps I could help you."

"You can't, and I wouldn't want you to," Artie said and he tentatively reached up and touched Cordelia's cheek. "But thank you for offering, and now do you mind if we talk about something else?"

Cordelia's cheek felt bereft when Artie dropped his hand. "What would you like to talk about?"

"We've talked about your past, how about your future plans?" Artie suggested, wanting to take the focus away from him.

Cordelia, however, wasn't having it. "I know that you're planning to do something terrible tomorrow, but what are your plans after that?"

"I haven't made any," Artie said honestly as he got up and picked up the second bottle of champagne that he had had delivered to the room.

"I thought everyone made plans," Cordelia said, accepting a glass of champagne as she spoke. "I mean even though I love my job, I know I don't want to model forever, that I want to get married eventually, and I also want children. What about you?"

"I've never considered having children," Artie said and he sat back down by her. "I have an older brother, and the pressure of continuing the family line will fall upon his shoulders."

"I wish I had had an older brother." Cordelia gave a sigh. "My parents hoped I'd be a boy, and I've always felt that even though they love me, they were more than a little disappointed that I wasn't."

"I don't know how anyone could be disappointed with you." Artie raised his hand to touch her cheek again. "You're smart, caring, and very lovely."

Cordelia's heart began to drum a little faster at Artie's touch. "I'm nothing special. Most of this is make-up. I'm really rather plain underneath it."

"I bet your boyfriend doesn't say that," Artie fished a little, wondering if she was single.

"I don't have a boyfriend." Cordelia blushed with embarrassment as she revealed why. "My parents don't approve of me dating until I turn eighteen."

"So you've never had a secret rendezvous?" Artie teased the blushing girl.

"No, I've never dared." Cordelia's parents were rather puritanical in this respect, and she had been brought up strictly but fairly, but this meant that she had never considered disobeying her parents' rules. Feeling rather uncomfortable under Artie's scrutiny, she moved slightly, forcing him to drop his hand. "How about you?"

Artie placed his hand on his knee. "My parents were quite the opposite. They actively encouraged me to date, going so far as to push me together with girls I had no interest in."

"So what is your girlfriend like?" Cordelia found herself hoping she was horrid.

"I don't have a girlfriend at the moment." Artie had parted ways with Diandra some time ago.

"Okay, what was your last girlfriend like?" Cordelia enquired, an insane urge driving her to ask.

"Blonde, very pretty, blue eyes," Artie noticed Cordelia's expression tighten, and he hastened to make her feel better, "and the most boring girl I've ever known."

Deep down Cordelia couldn't help but feel glad about Artie's rather mean description. "So she wasn't your ideal girl?"

"No. She was a family friend, and our respective parents decided we would be a good match." Artie had obeyed his parents' wishes, and had dated the girl. "But then she met someone she really liked and she dumped me."

"How did you feel about that?" Cordelia asked, not exactly looking at Artie as she did so.

"Relieved beyond belief." Artie had barely kissed Diandra in the time they had been together, neither being attracted to the other but both feeling obliged to conform to their parents' wishes. "She wasn't my type."

"Who is?" The words fell out of Cordelia's mouth before she could help herself.

"My ideal girl is a brunette, with blue eyes, and pink lips," Artie let a smile play across his lips, "and she's kind, a good listener, and, oh yes, she models for a living."

Cordelia eyes widened, and naively said, "That could be me."

"It is you," Artie said and he lifted his hand once more, and replaced it on Cordelia's face. "You really are lovely, and I only wish I could have met you sooner."

"You can still get to know me better." Cordelia lifted her own hand and placed it over Artie's. "There's still time."

"My time has almost run out," Artie's voice was trembling as he said it.

Cordelia's blood ran cold at the certainty Artie was showing. "Please, Artie, whatever it is you're planning to do, don't do it."

"I have to," Artie swallowed hard as he spoke. "Because if I don't, there's a man in my world who is going to destroy it, and even though I'm not sure that what I'm planning to do will change that, I at least have to try and make a difference."

"But why you?" Cordelia discovered she was crying.

"Because there is no-one else I can trust." Artie said. Unable to bear Cordelia's distress, he pulled her into his arms. "You hardly know me, I've told you I've done some terrible things, and yet you're still crying for me."

"I know I shouldn't be, but I can't help it." Cordelia looked up to stare at Artie. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Artie said, brushing her tears away with his fingers. "I like that you care."

Cordelia knew what was going to happen as Artie lowered his head, and she closed her eyes.

Artie felt her lips soften almost immediately under his own, and he slowly kissed Cordelia, relishing the taste of her slightly salty tear-coated mouth. When he lifted his head, he met her slightly dazed eyes. "Cordelia, I don't want to be alone tonight. Will you stay with me?"

Cordelia might not have had a boyfriend before but she knew only too well what Artie wanted. But she was surprised to discover that she wanted it too. "I want to but I'm scared."

"If at any point you tell me to, I'll stop," Artie offered, although he hoped that she would let him make love to her.

Cordelia swallowed nervously several times before nodding. "Okay."

Artie pulled her to her feet. "Kiss me."

Cordelia's eyes widened, but she bravely pressed her lips against Artie's, her arms going around his waist, as he sank his fingers into

her hair, pulling it down from the top-knot she had bound it into. The kiss deepened, and Cordelia reflexively clutched Artie's shirt, catching him with her nails and making him wince; she pulled free. "Sorry."

"You have claws." Artie took her hand and kissed it, before releasing Cordelia, an unusual pang of guilt going through him. "I really want you to stay and I know you've said yes, but I still feel as though I'm pressuring you."

Cordelia knew he was offering her a chance to leave, and she shook her head. "I don't want to leave you alone."

At her words, Artie pulled her back into his arms, and they began to kiss again. He felt her start when he unzipped her cream strapless dress, but she didn't break off the kiss then. She did, however, when he unclipped her bra and it joined her dress on the floor.

Her face burning, Cordelia lifted her arms to cover her breasts. "I feel a little exposed."

"Will this help?" Artie began to undress himself, his hands shaking slightly, as even though he was trying to project confidence to Cordelia, his heart was beating so quickly he thought it was going to jump out of his chest - this was only the second time he had ever done something like this.

Cordelia looked away as Artie removed everything except for his underwear. But when she glanced back, she spotted a strange mark on Artie's left arm. "Is that a tattoo?"

Artie rubbed his arm self-consciously. "Sort of."

"May I look?" Cordelia asked, even though she was already lifting Artie's arm so that she could see it.

"Go ahead." Artie gave a shudder as she ran her finger over the mark.

"It's pretty scary." Cordelia had never seen a tattoo that looked so realistic. "It almost looks as though the snake is moving."

"It's just the firelight," Artie said as he lowered his arm, and took Cordelia's hand, before leading her to the bed.

Present Time

Cordelia broke off there. "You can guess the rest."

"And what about in the morning?" Remus asked.

"He was gone," Cordelia answered. "He left me a note – I still have it in my locket."

Remus reached out to stop Cordelia when she went to remove the note. "You don't have to show it to me."

"I want to," Cordelia responded, and she took out the small piece of folded parchment. "Here."

Remus read the note.

"My lovely, sweet Cordelia,

I wish I could have said goodbye in person but it would have been too difficult. Thank you for making my last night on this earth special. You have no idea how much the hours we spent together meant to me.

Artie"

"I really am sorry," Remus said as he handed the note back.

"So do you think I'm right, and that he was a Death Eater?" Cordelia asked as she replaced the note.

"Yes," Remus answered. "It sounds as though this Artie's tattoo was a Dark Mark but it also sounds as though he regretted joining You-Know-Who."

"Do you have any idea of what he was going to do or if he succeeded?" Cordelia knew it was a long shot but she still asked.

"I'm afraid not," Remus said as he shook his head. "And I also have no idea who he was. However, I would guess at a pureblood but I don't know anyone who might have called themselves Artie, except for Arthur Weasley, and he was married by then."

"He had black hair," Cordelia quickly said. "And I know all the Weasleys are redheads."

"So we can rule him out," Remus decided, and he then turned back to the subject of Cordelia's pregnancy. "So how long was it before you discovered you were pregnant?"

"Six weeks," Cordelia responded. "And almost immediately I knew that no matter what else happened, I wanted to keep Justin."

"Did you decide that because you loved his father?" Remus asked bluntly.

"No, but I'm glad that he was conceived by two people who at that time cared for one another," Cordelia admitted.

At Cordelia's admission, Remus had another question. "Do you have any feelings for this Artie now?"

"No," Cordelia smiled as she answered. "But a part of me will always care about him, just because he fathered Justin."

"So why do you carry the locket around your neck with the note in it?" Remus asked, wanting to make sure that he was not about to try and pursue a relationship with a woman in love with a ghost.

"I was wearing it the night I was attacked. I don't know why – I rarely wore it but that night I did," Cordelia answered. "Since then I've worn it continually because I'm almost afraid of losing it; it's really the only thing I have that links Justin to his birth father apart from a ring he left for me, which is behind the locket. Again I wear this constantly because I'm afraid of losing it - I actually thought I'd lost it once before, and I didn't want that to happen again." Cordelia lifted the necklace and flashed a gold ring at Remus before dropping it back down into her blouse.

Remus barely spared the ring a glance. "So you're sure you're not still hung up on this Artie?"

"I like someone else," Cordelia said, her voice shaking somewhat as she admitted to her guilty feelings. "I have done since before Edmund died."

Aware that she could not be talking about him, Remus felt his stomach lurch with disappointment. "He's a lucky man."

Cordelia smiled softly at the disappointed looking man. "Remus, I'm talking about you. I've liked you ever since I first met you at my home, but I never ever believed that I would be in a position to act upon my feelings."

Remus gave a sigh of relief. "You had me worried for a moment."

"I'm sorry," Cordelia apologized, before going on. "I should have made it a little clearer. But even so, I think it's too soon for a relationship between us, even though I am attracted to you."

"I didn't think you would be ready yet - it's why I haven't said anything before now," Remus answered, before asking a question. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I would," Cordelia smiled at him. "It will give us a chance to talk a little more."

"I'd like that as well." Remus got up. "I'll fetch us a menu, or would you prefer to eat somewhere a little more formal?"

"Here is just fine," Cordelia confirmed.

Dinner seemed to fly by, and soon the two returned home. Once inside, Cordelia headed for the kitchen. "Can I make you a cup of tea?"

"I never say no to tea," Remus said, and he sat down at the large scrubbed wooden table.

Cordelia passed the kettle she had filled with water to Remus. "If you wouldn't mind? My trainer wand is upstairs in my room."

"Not at all." Remus tapped the tea kettle with his wand and steam immediately began to pour from the spout.

Cordelia warmed the pot. "Would you get me some mugs?"

Remus rose to his feet and headed over to the dresser, picking up two mugs before reaching around Cordelia to place them beside the teapot. "Here we go."

Cordelia filled the two mugs, and then got the milk out from the fridge. "I had a really nice time today."

"So did I," Remus responded. He then got up, put down his mug of tea, and began to hunt for some cookies. "I was sure we had some chocolate chip cookies in here."

"We do," Cordelia answered, joining Remus at the cupboard. "They're right in front of you."

Remus turned to express his gratitude, the box of cookies in his hand. "Thanks for..." The words died on his lips when he realized exactly how close Cordelia was standing to him. Putting down the cookies, his hands moved to Cordelia's waist, and he made his intentions clear. "I know we said we wouldn't rush things but I can't help myself."

Cordelia already knew Remus well enough to know that if she said no he would back off. But she didn't say anything. Instead she shut her eyes, and waited for him to close the gap. When Remus' mouth first covered hers, it was soft and coaxing but when Cordelia moved closer to him wanting more, Remus began to get more demanding. And so, when Remus' tongue travelled along the length of her bottom lip, Cordelia opened her mouth to grant him access, her own tongue intertwining with his, moans coming from both of them. When she finally broke free, Cordelia rested her forehead against Remus' shoulder.

However, before either of them could say anything, they were disturbed by the sound of movement in the hallway. Remus swiftly aimed his wand at Cordelia tidying her up. "I think Harry must be home early."

However, when their unexpected guest walked into the kitchen it turned out to be Lucy. "Hi."

Cordelia let out a relieved sigh. "Lucy, I thought you were Harry."

"You seem relieved I'm not," Lucy headed over to the cupboard and grabbed a mug. "So what did I miss, apart from the fact that Remus' hair is standing up at the back of his head?"

Cordelia went red when she noticed that it was evident that she had had her hands in Remus' hair. "Oh dear."

Lucy just grinned. "I had a feeling about you two."

"Don't jump the gun," Remus warned her. "We've only just decided to see how things go. Not everyone would be as understanding as you."

"You're concerned about Justin, aren't you?" Lucy guessed.

"Yes," Cordelia said, sitting down beside her friend. "It's too soon to tell him about a relationship that might not go anywhere."

"And speaking of relationships, what are you doing back so soon?" Remus joined the two women at the table.

"Things didn't exactly pan out for Charlie and me," Lucy said with a little sadness. "I think we're too different. He's dragon crazy, and I discovered that I'm not too fond of them, which when you add that to the fact that Charlie intends to spend the rest of his life working with dragons, it doesn't exactly add up to a successful relationship."

"It really was that bad?" Cordelia asked before biting into a chocolate chip cookie.

"Worse," Lucy admitted. What she omitted from telling Cordelia was that she believed that Charlie was in love with his boss; Lucy had been unable to avoid seeing how Charlie treated the woman with kid gloves, even if he had not realized he was doing it himself. "I admit we really had a strong initial attraction but attraction isn't enough to drive a relationship, especially when we're two different types of people, so I told him I was leaving, and in truth he seemed relieved."

"Are you okay?" Cordelia reached out and covered Lucy's hand as she asked.

"I'm fine," Lucy reassured her friend. "We're still friends, and I believe it's better to find out sooner rather than later." She put down her mug and filled it with tea. "So when did you two get together?"

"Today," Cordelia admitted. "But as I said, it's still new, and as you've just found out, new relationships don't always work."

"Don't get worrying. I won't say anything to anyone," Lucy promised. Then she picked up her mug of tea, and kissed both Remus and Cordelia on their cheeks. "Goodnight both."

Cordelia also stood up, her cheeks turning a fiery red as she looked at Remus, hoping that he would not take her words as an invitation. "I'd better head up to bed as well."

"Goodnight then," Remus got up and kissed Cordelia on her cheek, wanting to do more but not wanting to push things.

Cordelia had intended to step away, but suddenly she knew that she wanted nothing more than to kiss Remus again, and so she turned her head, finding Remus' mouth. The two were breathing heavily when they parted. "I really had better go to bed."

"I'll walk you up," Remus offered.

When they reached Cordelia's room, the two kissed again, and Cordelia found herself wishing she was brave enough to ask Remus in, but deep down she knew she was far from ready to take such a radical step. So instead she slipped into her room and closed the door behind her.

When Harry arrived later the next morning to spend the weekend, he had no idea about what was going on, both Remus and Cordelia taking care not to reveal that they were in a budding relationship. Lucy too kept quiet about the relationship but she had to tell him about the failure of her and Charlie's endeavor. Realizing that Harry was disappointed to learn that things between her and Charlie had not worked out, Lucy therefore offered to take Harry out that night to dinner to cheer him up. But in the end it was to be more than just the two of them as she was not to be Remus and Cordelia's only unexpected visitor that weekend.

Late on the wet and rather cold Saturday afternoon, Harry walked out of his bedroom to almost run into Hermione and Luna. He smiled brightly as he asked, "What are you two doing back?"

"Hermione had an argument with George," Luna informed him as she hugged him tightly. "So we came home."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out," Harry commiserated with Hermione as he hugged her next.

"It's not that serious. We're just taking a break," Hermione told him as she let go.

"George wants to marry Hermione as soon as they leave school, and to have lots of children," Luna told Harry, being deliberately and completely indiscreet.

His stomach going over in shock, Harry met Hermione's eyes. "What?"

"Let's go sit in your room," Hermione suggested. "It's cold out here, and I may as well tell you what happened now that Luna has spilled the beans."

Harry led the way in, talking as he went. "I take it you weren't too thrilled by George's plan for your life."

"I'm not even sixteen yet," Hermione said as she flopped onto the sofa, sighing contentedly as Harry caused the fire to climb higher before he sat down beside her. "I want to go to University, to travel, and then have a job before I have children, if I ever do."

"And George wants the opposite?" Harry checked he had understood things correctly.

"Not only that, he suggested living with his parents. I like the Weasleys, I really do but I just couldn't face the idea of living with them, nor could I deal with what George wants," Hermione said, rubbing her arms and shuddering. "Actually the thought of ever being tied down like that made me want to run screaming."

"She literally did," Luna grinned widely as she told Harry. "We were packed and out of there before the argument was barely over."

"It wasn't exactly an argument, it was more of a disagreement, and it happened yesterday afternoon," Hermione interjected. "But the upshot was that I decided I needed to get away. And this morning, I told George I needed some time to think things over."

"How long are you back for?" Harry asked, an idea forming in his mind.

"I said I might go back during the week but right now I don't know," Hermione said.

"What if I could come up with something else for you to do next week?" Harry asked.

"What?" Hermione responded, her interest piqued.

"Wait here," Harry said, getting up and heading out. When he returned it was almost an hour later and he was grinning widely. "How would you two like to join me at BritAD next week?"

"I would," Luna immediately said.

"Would we get to do anything, or are we just going to be watching you?" Hermione asked, not quite so quick to jump at the opportunity.

"You'd be doing the same as me," Harry informed her. "I spoke to Amelia, and she said that she can't see why Tonks can't teach you two to apparate at the same time as she teaches me."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "How did you get her to agree to that?"

Harry blushed. "I know I don't like using my status to get what I want but I pointed out that you two might need to be able to apparate because you're friends with the Boy Who Lived."

"And what about Justin and the others?" Hermione asked. "They're in just as much danger as we are."

"The training starts on Monday and they won't be home until Wednesday," Harry answered, and then went on to prove that he had not forgotten about the others. "And Amelia said that they can have lessons in the summer if she feels it is necessary." Having

answered Hermione's question, he looked in askance at his two friends. "So, are you interested?"

Now that she knew that she would be more than a mere spectator, Hermione nodded eagerly. "I'm in."

"It will mean that you can't go back to the Weasleys," Harry warned. "The course lasts all week, and at the end of it, you'll be tested."

It was far too tempting for Hermione to resist. "I hadn't made my mind up if I was going to go back to the Weasleys or not, and given the opportunity to learn something like apparition, I'd be foolish to turn it down."

"Then you'll be reporting in with me on Monday morning, and we'll all return here afterwards, rather than me going to Tonks' place again," Harry told them. "But before then, Cordelia said that although Remus has to go back to Hogwarts for a meeting tonight, the rest of us are all going out to dinner, and we're leaving in half an hour."

Hermione disappeared to her room to get ready, leaving Luna alone with Harry. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"Do what?" Harry asked innocently.

"Arrange it so that Hermione could spend time with you," Luna declared.

"I arranged it so that I could spend time with both of you," Harry reminded her that it would not just be him and Hermione attending BritAD. "And I'm well aware that Hermione is with George, so stop it with the wishful thinking."

Luna looked hard at Harry for a few minutes before sighing disappointedly. "I was just hoping. Anyway, I'm off to study my book on leprechauns – I'm sure I saw one in the back garden when I looked out of the window just before I saw you."

"Don't forget we're going to dinner shortly," Harry reminded her.

"I forgot," Luna sighed again. "It will have to wait until tomorrow."

"I'll meet you downstairs," Harry said, and after seeing Luna out he headed for his bathroom, his mind on what had just happened.

As Harry switched on his shower, he was feeling rather guilty that he had just lied to Luna, and that he had used his status as the Boy Who Lived in order to spend time with Hermione. Stripping off, Harry realized that it was only now that he had a little insight into what Ginny must have gone through when she had liked him. And now he also half-wondered if, by coaxing Hermione into spending time with him, he was being as underhand as Ginny had been.

Standing in the shower, Harry decided that he was not as bad as Ginny – he hadn't forced Hermione to go, but even coming to that conclusion, Harry still had a small voice in his head saying that he was just as bad. Swearing under his breath, he switched off the shower and hurriedly began to get dressed.

Hermione was about to leave her room when Harry knocked on the door. "Am I late?"

"No, I need to talk to you alone," Harry slipped into Hermione's room and shut the door. "Hermione, I just wanted you to know that you don't have to go to BritAD next week, and that if you want you can go back to the Weasleys."

Hermione's face fell. "Don't you want me to go?"

"Yes, of course I do," Harry immediately said. "But I don't want you to feel obliged to attend, and I don't want it to get in the way of your relationship with George."

"Harry, my attending a course for a week will be a good thing," Hermione responded. "And don't worry about my relationship with George - this is just a minor setback."

Harry gave a tight smile. "I suppose."

"Of course it is," Hermione said, believing Harry to be concerned about her relationship. "George will still be there at the end of the week."

And so rather disappointed about Hermione's response about George, Harry decided he was doing nothing wrong and he buried

the little voice that said he was being deceitful. As he did, he had no idea that George was shortly going to become aware of his feelings for Hermione, as was the object of his attraction.

Next Chapter: Ginny gets in deeper over her head; The trio head for BritAD; Amelia takes Harry back to the Hall of Prophecies.

Chapter 43: The Prophecy

17th April 1995, Hogwarts

As Harry and the girls made their way to BritAD accompanied by Remus, over at Hogwarts Ginny was busy making a tricky potion, the Draught of Peace, when the door opened. "I've almost finished, Severus."

"Severus?" Draco Malfoy asked in an oily voice. He was in Hogwarts to spend the day with Severus, as he usually did during Easter, and had gone in search of his godfather, only to come across Ginny instead.

Ginny was unable to look around at such a critical stage in making the draught, and she therefore continued to stir it, calling out instead, "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"Well, I'd like to know why you're calling my godfather 'Severus'," Draco drawled out.

"It's none of your business," Ginny snapped as the potion changed color, and she changed her stirring to counter-clockwise.

"Perhaps you're friendlier with him than you make out." Draco smirked as he took a seat opposite Ginny.

At long last Ginny finished stirring, and, after checking that her potion was now the right color and consistency, she placed a suspension spell over it. Only then could she look up to answer Draco. "That's a horrible thing to suggest."

"It would certainly explain why you got the sponsorship back, especially after you were kicked out of the program," Draco said in a slimy voice.

Ginny pulled a face full of revulsion at what Draco was implying, and protested that she was far too young for that sort of thing. "I'm only a third year, Malfoy."

"Didn't stop Pansy from putting out for me," Draco remarked.

Although she had heard rumors about the Slytherin girl, Ginny was still disgusted. "Just because your girlfriend is a slag, doesn't mean that I am."

"It doesn't seem like it to me," Draco said, getting up off of his seat to leave.

Her temper rising at Draco's words, Ginny reached out and slapped him. "How dare you!"

"Bitch!" Draco didn't hesitate and slapped the girl back, knocking her over with the force of the blow.

Lying on the floor, Ginny reached up and touched her mouth with her left hand. When she looked at her hand, there was blood on it from a tiny cut that had blossomed into life above her upper lip. Pain now joined anger, and Ginny got to her feet. "You are going to be so sorry you did that, Malfoy."

Draco laughed derisively. "I doubt it."

This just fueled Ginny's anger, and her wand flew her into her hand, her intentions evident. "Crescoramus!"

Draco avoided the spell that would have caused antlers to grow out of his head, and he turned his own wand on Ginny. "Muto Sententia."

Ginny dived out of the way of the jelly-brain curse, landing behind a desk. Using it for cover, she tried to stun Draco. "Stupefy."

Draco jumped out of the way, returning fire as he did so. "Reducto."

Ginny's eyes widened as the spell just missed her arm. "You bastard!"

"Nice language from a third year," Draco mocked Ginny as he came to stand over her.

"I'll show you nice language," Ginny said as she aimed upwards. "Iguolo!"

Not actually expecting Ginny's attack, Draco was taken by surprise. As the spell hit home, Draco's wand dropped from his hand as he grabbed his throat, blood spurting out from between his fingers, and he collapsed to the ground.

Ginny experienced a small rush of pleasure before she went white as she realized what she had done. "Oh Merlin! I'm so sorry." Kneeling over Draco, she tried to stem the open wound with her hands, blood leaking through her fingers.

She was lucky that Severus chose that moment to return to the potions room in expectation of finding the draught complete; instead he found a bloody scene. Guessing that there had been some sort of altercation – one that his godson had not fared so well in – he quickly assessed the damage, and then aimed his wand at Draco's throat. "Clausus Gutter."

Draco's throat stopped bleeding, and Severus turned his attention to Ginny. "What curse did you use on him?"

"Iuguolo," Ginny said, tears now tracking down her cheeks. "Is he dead?"

Severus knelt down and checked for a pulse; he could not find one. "Yes. Move back."

Ginny watched as Severus placed his wand on Draco's chest. "Pneum!"

Draco immediately began to cough up the blood that had lodged in his trachea before sucking in much needed air. Severus then headed to his potions store to find what he knew he would need. When he returned he had a tray of vials in his hand. Uncorking one of the vials, he lifted a still unconscious Draco up so that his godson's back was resting against his chest. "Massage his throat for me, Miss Weasley."

Ginny gently massaged Draco's throat, evidence of what she had done lying just beneath her fingers. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"Yes, you did," Severus said shortly as he poured the contents of the vial down Draco's throat, followed by a second one. "I need to get him to my rooms. You will come with us." He glanced at the floor

as he floated his godson up off of it. "First though, clean up that mess."

"Yes, Sir," Ginny said, not daring to call him Severus at that moment. Well acquainted with all forms of cleaning spells, courtesy of her mother, Ginny aimed her wand at the massive pool of blood, and did as Severus had demanded. Then she opened the door for him, following behind.

Luckily they reached Severus' rooms without mishap, and Severus laid Draco on his bed, before healing the wound on his throat. "I've given him some blood replenishing potions with a mild sedative in them. He'll be fine when he wakes up."

A still shaking Ginny followed Severus back into his sitting room. "I really didn't mean to hurt him. I was just so angry."

"Your eyes are black," Severus told her, ignoring Ginny's words.

Ginny looked into the mirror that sat above Severus' fireplace and gasped. "But I thought this wouldn't happen again."

"It was your first kill, and it will never happen again, not unless you go through withdrawal," Severus said brusquely. "Now sit down."

Ginny remained standing. "But..."

"Sit down and shut up!" Severus barked out. "You are going to be in serious trouble when Draco awakes. No doubt he'll go running to his father about what happened."

"Can't you obliviate him?" Ginny asked desperately.

"I could, but I'm not going to," Severus said, although he knew might have to if it turned out that Draco was at fault, and not Ginny. "Now, I want to know what happened."

Ginny reluctantly relayed the conversation she and Draco had had. "I'm sorry about what I did but he made me so angry. It was disgusting what he said."

While he understood how upsetting this was for Ginny, Severus himself held no misconceptions that some people might think that

some sort of sexual favor had come into play with Ginny's scholarship, even given how young Ginny was. But he had not expected Draco to be one of those people. "In your shoes, I would have felt the same way, and this certainly sheds a very different light on matters."

"So you'll obliviate him?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"I need to talk to Draco when he comes to, and then I'll decide on what course of action to take," Severus said, realization dawning that maybe this was the opportunity he had been waiting for to take things forward. "You may go to your room if you wish. I'll let you know when to come back."

Taking this for the dismissal it was, Ginny left. She did not have far to go though since she was staying in a bedroom next to Severus' rooms. Unlike Christmas, at Easter the entire school left for the holidays, and Albus had only agreed to Ginny's remaining behind if she was closely monitored. Once inside the bedroom, she threw herself on the bed and began to weep.

A few hours later, Draco woke up and immediately reached for his throat, thankfully finding it intact. Sitting up, he came face to face with his godfather, and immediately began to bleat out his side of the story. "Uncle Severus, Weasley started it..."

As he had with Ginny, Severus stopped Draco in his tracks. "I'm well aware of what Ginny did, and why. Or are you going to deny it, Draco?"

Draco was only too well aware that Severus could extract the information he was seeking forcibly if he had to, and so he came clean. "No, Sir."

"Good," Severus said. "Get up and come out into my sitting room."

Draco followed Severus out, and he scowled at Ginny, who had been summoned from her bedroom, and was now sitting reading a potions magazine. "My father will hear about this when I return home tonight."

"I doubt Lucius will be impressed to hear that you were bested by a thirteen year old, and a Weasley to boot," Severus immediately

remarked. "Nor will he be enamored to discover what you insinuated about me."

Draco reddened, and he tried to divert the conversation to what he believed to be the pertinent point. "She tried to kill me."

"And she succeeded," Severus corrected Draco. "If I hadn't returned to check on Ginny's progress when I did, you would now be in your coffin and Ginny would be in Azkaban."

"But she still injured me," Draco pointed out. "Don't I get some form of recompense?"

"Hardly. If anyone deserves recompense it would be Ginny for your insult," Severus said, before going on, intending to belittle Draco. "However, after your poor performance this morning, it is obvious that you are lacking in certain areas, so I intend to have Ginny teach you what she's already learned." When Draco pulled a face, Severus cautioned him. "And before you complain, quite a few of the spells and curses I've taught her are far in advance of anything you might know, which includes the luguolo curse she used on you."

Draco had had no idea of the caliber of spells and curses that Ginny was being taught by Severus, or that he was even teaching them to the girl. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," Severus said firmly, unmoved by his godson's pouting response. "But before we sort out the details, I have decided that the time is right for Ginny to meet her sponsor."

Draco had believed that Severus had been the one to provide Ginny's financial backing, hence his nasty comments that had led to his downfall. "You're not sponsoring her?"

"One of your father's former houseguests is," Severus told him, aware that Draco would about whom he was speaking.

Draco's mouth fell open in shock as he realized that Severus had to be talking about the man who had spent some time staying in a guest suite at Malfoy Manor, and who Draco believed to be the Dark Lord. "But..."

Severus waved a finger in the air. "I suggest you keep quiet. Ginny will learn his identity soon enough."

After Draco and Severus' exchange, Ginny suddenly became very frightened. "I don't think I want to meet this sponsor."

"Then we can go to the Ministry, and tell them what took place this morning," Severus said harshly, finally showing his true colors. "The choice is yours."

It didn't occur to Ginny to challenge Severus by pointing out that he had taught her the luguolo spell. At that moment fear was ruling her thought processes, and she remembered what Madam Bones had said to her. Not wanting her former charges reinstated, she believed that she had little choice in the matter, and although she was also frightened of who her mysterious sponsor might be, Ginny had to agree to Severus' demand.

Training Room, BritAD

Harry stepped into the training room, trailing behind Hermione and Luna, who had both cleared security and had been given temporary passes. "Hi Tonks."

"Hello, Harry," Tonks beamed at him. "Are you ready to take your final test?"

Hermione turned on Harry. "Final test? I thought we were learning apparition together."

"I wanted to surprise you," Harry said animatedly. "I actually finished my training last week but Examiner Twycross was unavailable until today for my final test."

"Harry picked it up first time," Tonks announced, looking proudly at him. "It was as if he's been doing it all of his life."

"So what are you going to be doing this week if you're not learning to apparate?" Luna asked in a disappointed voice.

"A bit of defense training, but mostly teaching you about apparition," Harry revealed, looking very pleased with himself.

"But he's no expert, and he hasn't even passed his test yet," Hermione said in a worried voice.

Harry spoke up before Tonks could. "My test is mostly just red tape. Tonks said that I'm really good at apparating."

Tonks confirmed Harry's claim. "He is actually. But as you quite rightly pointed out, Hermione, he is no expert. And so, once he's passed his test, his job won't actually be teaching you. He will be assisting me, mostly for the purposes of demonstrating how things are done."

Harry pulled a face at Tonks. "Spoilsport. I was enjoying teasing Hermione."

Hermione subsequently punched him in the arm. "That wasn't funny, Harry."

"I thought it was," Luna said, grinning at both of her friends. "So how good is really good, Harry?"

"I've been able to apparate accurately since Tuesday of last week," Harry announced, before turning to Tonks. "Can I show them?"

"Once you've taken your final test you can," Tonks told him as a man came in through the door. "So if you would go with Examiner Twycross, he'll take you to the test center. And I'll start explaining to the girls what's going to happen."

When Harry returned, he found Hermione and Luna being taught about destination, determination and deliberation. Hermione was scribbling in a notepad, and Harry glanced over her shoulder to see what she had written, reading out loud, 'One must be completely determined to reach one's destination, and move without haste, but with deliberation'.

Hermione jumped at the sound of Harry's voice so close to her ear. "I didn't hear the door."

Harry grinned in triumph. "I apparated in from the test center."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "Isn't apparition banned inside the Ministry?"

"Not if you have level one clearance, it isn't," Tonks remarked in a slightly annoyed voice. "Something even I don't have!"

"You said I could show them once I'd passed my test," Harry reminded her. "And I passed my test."

"But that was simply showing off," Tonks countered, more than a little peeved that Harry was allowed to do something that for her was forbidden.

Harry had not intended to show off, but he had been so excited that he had been unable to help himself. But realizing that his enthusiasm had come across as something else, he had the good grace to blush and apologize. "Sorry, Tonks. What do you want me to do?"

Tonks mellowed at his submissive response. "We are just going to be dealing with the basics today, and so..."

Laurifer Manor (formerly Fletchley Manor)

Tom stepped into the drawing room, the gold mask he favored in public adorning his face. "Severus, I see you've brought someone to see me."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus used the title, although Tom didn't like it in private.

As she connected the dots, Ginny took several steps backward in fear. Draco, who was standing right behind her, pushed her forward. Then, after bowing low, Draco greeted Tom. "My Lord."

"Severus, why is Lucius' son here?" Tom asked, ignoring Draco's greeting.

Severus outlined what had happened. "... and so, I thought it an opportune moment to introduce Ginny Weasley to you face to face."

"And you'd be right," Tom said. He then addressed Draco. "Malfoy, you will wait outside for Severus and Ginny. As for what has happened, outside of this circle, you will not mention this to anyone. Do I make myself clear?"

Draco himself was yet to swear an oath of loyalty to Tom, but he was to take the Dark Mark on his next birthday, and he understood only too well from his parents what happened to people who disobeyed the Dark Lord. He therefore had no intention of saying anything to anyone. "Yes, my Lord."

Once Draco had left, Tom removed his mask. "That's better."

Ginny gasped in shock, and not a little relief. "You're not You-Know-Who!"

"Actually, I am," Tom said. When Ginny looked at him in disbelief, he asked, "Do you remember the magical encyclopedia, Ginny?"

"How do you know about that?" Ginny asked, her initial terror having dissipated somewhat in spite of Tom's claim that he was Lord Voldemort; something she knew could not possibly be true as Tom was far too young.

"Because I'm Tom," Tom said, watching skepticism illuminate Ginny's face.

"But you can't be," Ginny said in protest. "Tom was someone in a book."

Tom had expected such a reaction, and he therefore told Ginny some of the things that transpired between them. "I'm the one who told you about the ten uses for eucalyptus oil as well as listening to your desire to be with Harry Potter. I believe you described him as 'the boy of my dreams'."

Satisfied that he was telling the truth, Ginny staggered backwards. "But how?"

Tom pointed to a chair. "Sit down." Once Ginny had done so, he began to explain. "Lord Voldemort placed me in the diary, which you thought was an encyclopedia, as a sort of security for him to keep him alive in case he was ever mortally wounded. Inside the diary I

fell into a state of slumber until I was awakened by someone writing in the diary."

"How did you get out?" Ginny asked, feeling more than a little uncomfortable with knowing that this young man was someone with whom she had shared her deepest secrets.

"I sucked the life out of Lockhart," Tom said. "And left the castle with Severus' aid."

"And you're my sponsor?" Ginny asked, her voice now shaking horribly, revealing how frightened she had become again.

"I am," Tom said as he sat down opposite Ginny, and then indicated that Severus should do the same. When Ginny said nothing, he prompted her, "I can tell you want to know more. So I suggest you take this opportunity to ask questions. I won't be offering it again."

Ginny quickly found her tongue. "But how could you afford to sponsor me if you've been living in a book?"

"I have... friends in high places," Tom said. "They have provided me with whatever I required, including money to sponsor you."

Ginny had another question arising from his confirmation. "But why sponsor me? Why not sponsor Malfoy?"

Tom gave an unpleasant smile. "Malfoy is already firmly on my side; you are not. And when the diary ended up in your hands, and you told me about Harry Potter, and who your family is, I saw an opportunity to infiltrate the Light should I ever escape."

"And you woke up because I wrote in the diary!" Ginny exclaimed, horrified by what she believed she had inadvertently allowed to happen. "What have I done?"

"Because you preferred to take the easy option, I'd say you've sold your soul to me, Ginny," Tom said lightly. "You're mine now."

"I won't help you," Ginny said defiantly, although her tear-laden and trembling voice betrayed how frightened she was.

"But you will," Tom disagreed, his tone becoming threatening. "You see, if you don't agree to join me, then I will instruct Severus to hand you over to BritAD, together with your wand as evidence. Of course I will have to obliviate you and kill Malfoy to reconstruct today's events, but I am willing to do whatever is necessary. And then, once you are in Azkaban awaiting trial, I will arrange to have your family eliminated. Now tell me, Ginny, are you going to join me, or am I going to have to turn back the clock?"

Ginny was conscious that she was in way over her head, and she therefore made a tearful petition of the young man sitting opposite her. "Please don't do this to me."

"Your tears won't work on me," Tom said coldly. "And I'm waiting for answer."

Terrified of going to Azkaban, and of losing her family, Ginny eventually nodded. "I'll join you."

"Good answer, particularly as I understand from Lucius that the Wizengamot has just voted to reintroduce the death penalty, and I'm quite sure Lucius would see it administered if his son died," Tom said in a further warning. "And now you are going to swear an oath of allegiance to serve me."

"Take the D..D..Dark Mark?" Ginny stuttered in terror.

"Not yet, just an oath," Tom responded, leaving Ginny in no doubt that one day she would have to take that final step. "I can't have you telling anyone about me or Severus, and the oath will ensure that you keep your mouth shut. If you don't, then you've signed your own death warrant. Now take out your wand, and repeat after me..."

Hogwarts

After Severus had sent Draco on his way home, Ginny waited until she and Severus were inside his rooms before she turned on him. Opening her mouth, she fully intended to scream out her anger at him, at what he had done to her. But she was too aware of how close he appeared to be to Tom, and she was also very afraid of what might happen to her family if she did. So instead of spewing

forth the virulent stream of loud, angry words that she wanted to, Ginny instead said pathetically, "I thought you liked me."

"I do like you," Severus said truthfully, aiming his wand at the fireplace to ignite the fresh wood that had been piled there.

"So why did you take me to see him?" Ginny challenged Severus' claim, although fear ensured that her voice held no belligerence.

"Because Tom told me to do so when you were ready, and after I learned that you had attacked Draco after he had stopped firing at you, I believed you were ready today," Severus said as he turned and sat down in his favorite high-backed chair.

"Ready for what?" Ginny asked.

"To take the next step, and to learn the truth about who Tom really is," Severus said. "Which is quite an honor, as apart from myself, there are only three others who know his true identity."

"I would rather have been kept in the dark," Ginny said sullenly.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Severus said, and he leant back. "It has been ever since you first wrote in that diary."

"I wish I'd never used it," Ginny said resentfully, pacing up and down, thinking back to how she had poured her heart and soul into the diary. "Even though it was just a diary, Tom felt real, and I thought, as stupid as it sounds, that he was my friend and that he liked me."

"He does like you," Severus said, wishing the girl would stop her pacing; it was irritating him.

Ginny disagreed. "There's no way he likes me. He just threatened to have my family killed."

"If he hadn't liked you, then you would be dead, Ginny," Severus said bluntly, before going on. "Tom could have stayed hidden in the diary, only revealing himself to you, and you would have been the one to die in the Chamber, and not Lockhart. But because he liked you, he asked you to introduce me to him, and I ensured your survival by planting the diary on Lockhart."

Ginny visibly shivered as she connected the dots. "You planted the diary on Lockhart? I thought that because he was the Defense teacher you must have given it to him."

"I would hardly call Lockhart a teacher, and I did give the diary to him, although not directly," Severus said, and then he admitted what Ginny so far had not worked out. "And I was also the one to place it on you that day you dropped your books in the hallway."

Ginny finally understood why Severus had been so pleasant towards her. "You tried to kill me!"

"If I had wanted you dead, I could have done it without the aid of a diary," Severus responded drily. "The diary was originally meant for Potter, but due to circumstances conspiring against me, I was unable to place it on him, and so I chose you to take his place."

"But why me?" Ginny asked, moving away from Severus until she could go no further, her back against the wall.

"Because you were a pureblood from a Light family who was expendable; at least you were until Tom decided otherwise," Severus said, before shaking his head at Ginny's attempt to move away from him. "I'm not going to hurt you, Ginny." When she remained where she was, Severus withdrew his wand and placed it on the table close to where she was standing. "Now, I know you must have more questions, so pick up the wand, stop the histrionics, and ask your questions. Because as Tom said earlier, this will be your only opportunity to do so."

Ginny picked up the wand that Severus had placed on the table, feeling more comfortable with it in her possession. She was still afraid of the man seated before her, but she had to admit to herself that Severus did have a point. He could have hurt her long ago, and she did have more questions. Putting the wand up her sleeve, she began pacing again. "Why was Lockhart expendable?"

"Because, even though the man was a complete waste of space, he still possessed a reasonable amount of power," Severus said, having learned from Lockhart's boasting that he registered over two hundred on the Magus scale, something Albus had confirmed to be true after Lockhart's death.

"Power that Tom needed to escape the diary?" Ginny asked. When Severus nodded, she asked another question. "So what did Tom mean by 'he was security for You-Know-Who'?"

"I suggest you get used to calling him the Dark Lord," Severus said, before moving on. "And sit down – I've already said I'm not going to hurt you, and you have my wand."

Ginny had no idea that Severus always carried more than one wand, and so she sat down, but still in the seat furthest away from Severus. "Is that better?"

"Much," Severus said, and then he began his explanation. "Tom is a piece of the Dark Lord's soul."

Ginny's eyes widened. "So Tom was telling the truth when he said he was You..., I mean the Dark Lord?"

"I believe that is what I just said," Severus snapped irritably, before he went on. "Now, the only way for the Dark Lord to ensure his long term survival was by taking a life to create a vessel known as a Horcrux. This life effectively opened a doorway into the Horcrux – in this case, the diary. After the Dark Lord placed the piece of his soul that you know now as Tom inside the diary, the doorway closed." Severus stopped talking, and surprised Ginny with a question that came from out of the blue. "Would you like something to drink?"

Ginny was a little taken aback by the suddenness of the question, but her mouth felt awfully dry and did not taste particularly nice - Ginny guessed it was from fear, and so she nodded that she would. At her acceptance, Severus disappeared into his kitchen, and returned a short time later with two mugs of liquid. He passed one to her, and she gave him a brief smile. "Thank you."

"I have put something in it, but it's just a mild relaxant," Severus warned Ginny when she hesitated before taking a sip of the hot chocolate he had made for her. "Your fidgeting is more than a little irritating, and this will stop it."

Now Ginny understood why Severus had stopped mid-explanation, and she unwillingly found herself apologizing. "Sorry. I'm still a little nervous."

"And the relaxant will help with that," Severus said. He omitted from saying that the hot chocolate also contained a sedative, which would ensure that Ginny slept all night while he prepared a complicated potion that Tom had requested. "Now where was I?"

"You said about a doorway closing," Ginny prompted him.

And so Severus continued with his explanation. "In order to open up the doorway again and leave the diary, Tom had to use a wizard's life energy, and after you were taken out of the equation, together we chose Lockhart for this purpose."

"But I still don't understand why I was picked," Ginny said. "I know I can't register anywhere near two hundred on the Magus scale."

Severus wondered when Ginny would spot that. "Tom did not actually need that much power to escape the diary, but the more power he could access the easier it would be to escape. And so, Potter's detention was dreamed up so that Tom could also suck the life from Potter, but as we both know, that failed."

Ginny had an unsettling thought. "Tom won't expect me to kill Harry, will he?"

Severus shook his head. "I doubt it. As far as I am aware, Tom wishes to kill Potter himself." He could see that his answer was rather worrying to Ginny, and he therefore reminded her of what was at stake should she ever try to reveal their discussion. "I know you have a thing for Potter, Ginny, but don't forget - should you try to discuss this with anyone other than me or Tom, then the oath you swore will kill you."

"I know that," Ginny said bitterly. "And I don't have a thing for Harry anymore, but I don't want him dead either."

"Then you are going to be disappointed," Severus warned her. "Tom will kill him eventually, and there's nothing you or I can do to stop it. Not that I would want to, of course."

Ginny had always been curious about Severus' hatred of Harry, and with the additives in her hot chocolate loosening her tongue, she finally asked, "Why do you hate Harry so much?"

Severus' initial reaction was to snarl at Ginny, telling her it was none of her business, but then he relented at the wounded look on her face. "I'm sorry. You asked a fair question."

Ginny could see that she had nevertheless hit a sore spot. "I was being too nosey, wasn't I?"

"Yes," Severus agreed. "But I should have just said that my reasons are my own, and not sniped at you."

Ginny was rather pleased that Severus had apologized, but recognizing that he would not tell her the truth about Harry, she changed the subject. "Do I still have to teach Malfoy the spells you've taught me?"

"You do, and you'll be doing it in the privacy of the Room." Severus had no intention of anyone finding out that Ginny was fraternizing with his godson. "But you won't be alone. I shall also be attending in order to teach you how to wield all three Unforgivable Curses, although I expect it will be some time before you are able to cast the killing curse effectively."

Given what had happened that day, Ginny was not surprised to discover that she would have to learn the illegal curses. "Does Malfoy know how to cast them?"

"Two of them he does, although he has so far only mastered one of them," Severus said. "But this will change, and you will both master all three, as eventually the day will come when you will likely have need of them."

"But I don't want to have need of them," Ginny said, although the hot chocolate stopped any real alarm at Severus' words.

"You will change your stance," Severus told her. When Ginny denied she would, a yawn impregnating her words, Severus brought up her earlier attack on Draco. "Do you remember how you felt when you killed Draco?"

Ginny slowly nodded, and with the sedative breaking down her final reserves, she reluctantly admitted, "It was exciting, and I liked it. But that was before..." Ginny stopped, her words beginning to slur, and

she shook her head to try and clear the sluggish feeling she was experiencing, before she continued, "...before I realized what I had done."

"The luguolo curse is a relatively mild curse when it comes to killing, and the pleasure you felt would have been minimal," Severus said. "However, the first time you take a life using the killing curse, the rush you feel can only be described as exquisite."

Ginny wanted to be terrified as she divined the meaning behind Severus' words, but she felt far too sleepy and comfortable to be scared. And her voice sounded as if it was coming from far away as she asked, "You've used it?"

"Many times," Severus admitted. "Just as you will."

"Don't want to," Ginny mumbled, her eyelids fluttering down. "It's a..."

Severus caught the cup before it hit the floor, and placed it on the table, before saying, "You'll change your mind, Ginny. I did." He then scooped her up, and carried her through to her room, before leaving to work on the potion Tom had requested from him.

21st April 1995, BritAD

During the week, Harry had found himself splitting his time between doing more defense training, and helping Tonks with Hermione and Luna. And despite their disappointment that Harry had not been there with them all of the time, both girls had thoroughly enjoyed themselves. But now it was crunch time for them both as they reached the final hurdle they had to overcome before they could take their apparition tests.

Tonks stood at the apparition area. "Harry, if you would apparate to point 43 and wait for Hermione."

Harry checked his miniature guide, and then imagined the point described there, disappearing almost silently. Hermione scowled. "He's only been apparating for two weeks. How does he do that?"

"I wish I knew," Tonks remarked. "I've been apparating for years and I still sound like a herd of elephants." She turned to Luna. "I'm going to apparate to point 36. When you are ready, and only when you are ready, I want you to follow me. The same for you, Hermione; only follow Harry when you are ready to do so."

Despite having done well in all of the tests, Hermione was nervous about this one. Up until now they had not attempted a description only point to point apparition. And, in line with the advanced apparition skills she and Luna had been learning, they had to complete this apparition successfully in order to take the final examination with Examiner Twycross. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on where she wanted to be.

The moment Hermione arrived, she knew she had not splinched herself, and she yelled out, "I did it!"

Harry braced himself as Hermione hurled herself at him for a hug. "Whoa!"

Harry's warning was too late, and Hermione catapulted into him, Harry's arms automatically enfolding her to steady them both. And lost in a moment of sheer delight, an overexcited Hermione planted a kiss on Harry's lips, unthinkingly treating Harry as she would have George.

Harry initially stiffed at the contact, and then relaxed, his lips softening under the pressure of Hermione's mouth.

As Harry's lips softened under her own, just as she had in the Chamber, Hermione gave into the pleasurable sensation, and she pushed her mouth harder against Harry's, wanting more.

But at that moment the sound of something moving among the rubbish in the alleyway intruded upon Hermione's consciousness, and reality set in. She immediately pulled free, blinking rapidly in shock at Harry in the dim light of the alleyway. Then, after dropping her gaze, she shakily asked, "So, do I apparate back now?"

It was obvious to Harry that Hermione did not want to discuss what had just happened, and taking his cue from her, he said, "You can apparate back anytime you want to. Just make sure not to splinch yourself – you'll be ineligible to take the final test if you do."

"You go first," Hermione said, still unable to meet Harry's eyes. "I'll follow when I'm ready."

Harry took several deep breaths. After what had just happened, he too was feeling somewhat off-kilter, and he was now more than a little concerned about his apparition abilities in such a state. But he need not have worried. As he had been doing since he had first tried to apparate, Harry made the jump without leaving any of himself behind.

In the darkened alleyway, Hermione leant shakily against the wall, talking to herself. "You can do this, Hermione. Don't let a chemical reaction get to you. You can do this." However, almost five minutes had passed before she finally felt able to apparate without splinching herself.

Harry, Luna, and Tonks were all waiting for her when she returned, Tonks smiling brightly. "Let's go see Examiner Twycross."

Hermione and Luna both passed the final test, and once it was over, Tonks shook hands with the examiner and then turned to the children. "Why don't I take you all out for lunch to celebrate?"

"I'll buy," Harry immediately said, but he turned to Tonks for an idea of where to go. "Can you suggest somewhere really nice?"

"Tortini is a good restaurant if you like Italian food," Tonks responded. "It's just a short apparition point away."

Hermione was unsure about how she was going to get through lunch after what she had done, and she therefore remained silent. But Luna was excited to be putting her newfound skill to the test, and she announced, "I'm ready."

"I just need to let the action desk know where I am," Tonks said as she hurried out of the testing room. "I'll meet you all down in the foyer."

Harry led Hermione and Luna out of the room, putting his arm around Luna's waist to give her a friendly one-armed hug. Normally he would have done the same to Hermione, but he felt rather self-conscious about doing so after the kiss. However, he still smiled at

both girls, although Hermione appeared to be having trouble in meeting his gaze. "I'm really glad you both came with me. It made this week more fun."

"I'm glad as well," Luna answered, looping her arm around Harry's waist, and in doing the same to Hermione, she forced the girl to become part of the tangle of arms. "It was exciting, and I got to see..."

Walking along Luna babbled happily about her experiences, but as they neared the ladies' bathroom, a somewhat uncomfortable Hermione slipped out of Luna's embrace, and interrupted her friend. "I won't be long."

Hermione, however, had no intention of using the bathroom; she just wanted to put a little distance between herself and Harry to try to get her emotions on an even keel. Luna's group hug had forced Hermione to be closer to Harry than she now wanted to be, and her stomach had become a mass of butterflies; butterflies Hermione needed to get under control if she was to sit through lunch with Harry.

Outside of the bathroom, Luna waited for Hermione to close the door before turning on Harry. "Something happened between you and Hermione, didn't it?" When Harry said nothing, Luna pushed. "Harry, I saw that strange look on your face when you apparated back, and then when Hermione eventually arrived back, she wouldn't look at you. Something did happen. I know it did."

"Okay, okay. Something happened," Harry finally admitted.

Luna became rather excited that she had been right. "Tell me then."

Harry glanced around to make sure that there was no-one within earshot, his cheeks reddening as he told his friend what had happened. "Hermione was really excited when she apparated in, and she was a little overenthusiastic with her hug. She ended up almost knocking us over, and so I put my arms around her to steady us. And that was when she kissed me."

Luna's eyes grew larger. "And what was it like?"

"I was so surprised that I didn't kiss her back," Harry admitted. "And the kiss wasn't full on, but for one moment I thought it was going to go that way."

Luna became even more excited. "So what did Hermione say when the kiss ended?"

"She ignored what happened," Harry said, his voice laced with disappointment. Then he shook himself. "And I think she was right to do so."

"But you're supposed to be with her, Harry," Luna reminded Harry of her belief for what seemed to be the hundredth time. "And what happens just proves it."

"I don't think it does. I think that the kiss was probably just a spur of the moment thing because Hermione was excited." Harry wished it had been for a romantic reason but he was unable to bring himself to believe that. "And Hermione isn't the sort to cheat on someone; she really cares about George. And regardless of how I feel about Hermione, I don't want to hurt George by chasing after his girlfriend because of a kiss that would have meant nothing to Hermione."

Luna was not giving up. "I don't want to see George upset either, but don't you think this is some sort of sign, Harry? The two of you are always accidentally kissing."

Engrossed in their conversation, neither Harry nor Luna noticed Hermione coming out of the bathroom. However, the oversized, strange looking bug in the large plant that sat outside the ladies' bathroom did, and, upon seeing that Hermione had stopped walking when she had spotted her, the bug immediately flew off.

Completely unaware of what was happening behind him, Harry continued talking to Luna about his feelings. "Luna, I truly believe that you can tell whether a couple should be together, but in this case I think you're wrong. I admit we have chemistry but..."

Hermione caught only the part of the conversation about the chemistry as she returned, and she immediately interrupted, jumping to the wrong conclusion. "You and Luna are getting together?"

Luna decided to see how Hermione would react if she said yes, and so she told a little white lie. "We're thinking about it."

Hermione didn't know why but the mention of Harry having Luna as a girlfriend sent a small frisson of alarm through her. "This is a bit sudden, isn't it?"

"We've been thinking about getting together for a while," Luna lied, ignoring Harry treading heavily on her foot.

Missing Harry's movement, Hermione made a flip remark to cover up her confusion about how much Luna's words were bothering her. "Even so, you want to be careful, Harry. Perhaps Luna is using Amortentia on you."

"Luna is using Amortentia?" Tonks joined the group, like Hermione, catching the conversation at a point where she had missed the preamble.

"Harry and Luna are thinking about getting together, and I was just joking about her using Amortentia on him to seduce him, like Ginny did," Hermione filled Tonks in.

"I'd use Amortentia to seduce you as well, Harry, but I think you're just a little too hot to handle," Tonks teased a slightly flushed Harry, as she had done continually during the entire two weeks he had spent at BritAD.

Harry went even redder than he already was. "Tonks!"

Tonks felt his cheeks. "Yep, too hot to handle."

Harry scowled at her, and pulled free of her touch, before snapping out in an embarrassed voice, "Let's just go and eat."

Once inside the restaurant, Luna spent most of the lunch flirting with Harry. Harry therefore waited for her to leave the table to use the bathroom before following her after a few moments. And when Luna exited the bathroom, Harry grabbed her arm, pulling her closer to him so that he could whisper, "Luna, what the hell are you playing at with all the touching and winking?"

"I thought Hermione looked upset when I told her we were thinking about getting together," Luna whispered back. "So what do you think about pretending we really are?"

"I think no," Harry said. "It's..."

He didn't get a chance to say anything else, as Hermione, who now really did require the bathroom, came around the corner, and Luna decided to grasp the opportunity to make more mischief. Before Harry knew what had happened, Luna had wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled his head down to her own and soundly kissed him.

Hermione went red, and she coughed politely. "I'm sorry but I need to get by."

Luna let Harry go, and made an announcement, "Harry just asked me out, and I said yes."

Harry was more than a little angry at Luna's declaration, and he wanted to deny it. But without telling Hermione the truth about how he felt, and denouncing his younger friend as a liar, he had little choice but to go along with the ploy. He therefore put his arm around Luna's shoulders, firmly turning her back towards the restaurant. "I'm sure Hermione might have guessed that. And now I think we should go sit back down before we embarrass anyone else."

Hermione headed into the bathroom, her stomach going over at the thought that her two best friends were now dating. Telling herself that it was just concern in case it didn't work out, she headed for one of the cubicles. But as she sat down, her mind wandered back to the kiss she had given Harry.

Talking to herself, she said, "Hermione, this is ridiculous. Harry is obviously not interested in you if he's going out with Luna, to say nothing of the fact that you're dating someone else. And you imagined that he liked the kiss, and you've probably really embarrassed him." Infuriated at herself, Hermione finished doing what she had to, before heading out of the cubicle to wash her hands, still talking to herself. "So slap on a smile, and get back out there." After drying her hands, she did exactly that.

Making her way back to the table, Hermione passed a woman with strangely stiff, curly blonde hair, and three gold teeth, who nodded at her. Hermione nodded politely in return before heading back to the private table that had been allocated to them; a perk of Harry's fame. She had no idea that the woman was the same bug who had been on the plant listening to Harry and Luna's discussion, and that at that very moment the woman was debating whether or not to publish what she had overheard.

Aware that the bushy haired girl had spotted her in her Animagus form, Rita Skeeter decided that she would probably be a fool to publish the piece, just in case Hermione put two and two together. Rita glanced over to where the group was laughing together, the sound not carrying out to the main restaurant due to a silencing spell the management had in place to protect its more distinguished guests. She wished she knew what they were talking about, although she doubted it was anything to do with the kiss that she had discovered that Hermione and Harry had shared; a kiss she knew would make a good story, especially given who Harry was, and that Hermione was dating the son of a well-known bastion for the Light, and a pureblood to boot. But, after much consideration, and after finishing a very expensive lunch, Rita decided to take a more direct route; one that might cause a little discord amongst Harry's friends, and might still result in a story she could hopefully acquire from one of her contacts in Hogwarts. Satisfied, she paid the bill, and then left.

When Harry and his friends returned to BritAD after lunch, they were all taken to the room that contained the instrument for measuring their power. Hermione went first and was thrilled when she registered one hundred and eighty-nine, which was rather high for a witch of her age. Even Luna was higher than normal, registering at one hundred and fifty-four. However, it was Harry who would shock them all.

Once Luna had climbed down, Amelia indicated that Harry should take his place on the scales. "Please climb onto the scale, Harry."

Harry did as he was told, even though he thought it was a complete waste of time, and he felt embarrassed that he would register lower than his two friends. "But it's not been that long since you last did this."

"You were only just thirteen when I last did this, and I therefore want to check your reading again," Amelia said, and she looked down. "And I'm glad I did."

Harry now looked down at his own monitor, and questioned the reading. "Two hundred and thirty-three? I can't have jumped a hundred points in less than two years. Is it working properly?"

"It is, but you can try it again if you're unconvinced," Amelia said. After Harry did exactly that, and got the same reading, Amelia indicated that Harry could get down. "I'm not going to record your true power level, Harry. I don't want anyone else knowing about this."

"But we know about it, Madam Bones," Hermione interjected.

"And, for Harry's sake, I would expect you and Miss Graham-Lovegood to keep this information to yourselves," Amelia said in a very stern voice.

"We'd never want anything to happen to Harry," Luna assured her, and Hermione swiftly followed suit.

"So can I tell Justin about it?" Harry asked.

"No," Amelia refused. "The fewer people who are aware, the better."

"But why not?" Harry asked, unable to see why he couldn't tell his best friend, especially as Hermione and Luna now knew the truth.

"There are many reasons why not, Harry," Amelia smiled consolingly at the boy. "My main one being that should You-Know-Who ever rise again, I'd rather he have no idea of how powerful you are."

"Why is it so important that he doesn't know?" Harry questioned Amelia's concern. "I know he wants me dead; he said so when he was part of Quirrell's head but all I have to do is avoid him if he ever returns."

"I'm afraid that it isn't as clear-cut as that," Amelia said in a voice full of worry. "Harry, I'm about to show you something that Albus doesn't believe you are ready for, and up until now, neither did you."

"I don't understand," Harry said, confused by Amelia's comment.

Amelia opened the door. "Come with me, Harry. If you two girls would wait here, we'll return shortly."

Harry hesitated, and looked back at his friends. "They already know about the power reading. I want them to come as well."

Spotting the obstinate look on Harry's face, Amelia became aware that Harry was unlikely to budge from his stance, and so she reluctantly indicated that the girls should also accompany them.

Leaving the room, the group headed up the corridor until they reached Amelia's private elevator. Once inside, she pressed the number nine, and the lift ascended. After they reached the correct floor and disembarked, Amelia led the group up a stark white corridor, at the end of which was a black door. "As Harry will remember, behind this door is a room that will be a little disorientating at first until we identify ourselves, and the room recognizes our magical signatures. And as only Harry and I possess level one clearance, you will both need to be touching us, otherwise the room won't allow me to select a specific destination. Miss Graham-Lovegood, please take hold of my hand. Harry, if you would take Miss Granger's hand."

Harry held out his hand, and it was duly taken by Hermione, who clasped it firmly. Harry experienced little shockwaves running up his arm, but he did his best to hide what he was feeling. He had no idea that it was affecting Hermione as much as it was affecting him.

Only once she was satisfied that she had a firm hold on Luna, did Amelia open the door and step into the room. As it began to spin, she called out, "Amelia Bones, Head of British Auror Division, Access Hall of Prophecies."

Harry also identified himself, and soon the room ended its nauseating spinning, and across from them, another door opened. Amelia indicated that they should all go that way. "The door leads to the Hall of Prophecies."

Unable to remember his earlier journey into the room, Harry asked the same question he had previously. "What's the Hall of Prophecies?"

Before Amelia could answer, Hermione jumped in. "It's a room that contains all the prophecies made in the wizarding world."

"Well put, Miss Granger." Amelia stood aside so that Harry and Hermione could walk by her, and she held out her free arm to indicate the space beyond. "This, Harry, is the Hall of Prophecies."

By the light of hundreds of blue-flame candles, Harry could see towering shelves that to him seemed to stretch into infinity. "Wow!"

Luna too couldn't help but stare at the shelves that appeared to contain thousands of glass orbs. "What exactly are they?"

"They are recording devices made to store the prophecies," Amelia started walking. "But be warned, if you touch one that doesn't pertain to you, you will be driven insane."

Harry kept his arms firmly at his side. And, noticing that Amelia was still holding on to Luna, Harry retained his own grip of Hermione's hand, telling himself it was safer that way, although deep down, he knew he was doing it just to be close to her. As they walked, he asked, "Why are we here?"

"I want you to see a prophecy, Harry." Amelia said. She then stopped walking, and released Luna's hand. "I really should have brought you alone to see this and refused your request to let these young ladies accompany us, but I have a feeling that despite my earlier warning, you will be sharing what you know with all of your friends anyway."

Harry blushed guiltily, and he reluctantly released Hermione's hand. "Probably."

Amelia did not believe that she would be able to stop Harry from doing so, and so instead she gave him a warning. "Just make sure that you can trust who you tell. And I don't mean that lightly. For instance, as much as I know that you trust my niece..."

Harry interrupted. "I do totally."

"Let me finish," Amelia chided him gently. "I don't think you should tell Susan. She would never deliberately hurt you but I'm afraid the

girl can't help herself sometimes, and she might let something slip. So, as I just said, even though you might trust someone, please don't tell them unless you really are certain you can trust them not to give you away, whether it be accidental or not."

"I won't," Harry promised.

Amelia had to be satisfied with Harry's promise, and so she moved on, pointing to the shelving to her left. "On the third shelf in, three shelves up, and three globes in from the left, you will see a globe that is marked with your name. You may lift it up."

Harry looked over at the shelf, but he did not immediately attempt to acquire the globe. "What is the prophecy it contains about?"

"It's about you and You-Know-Who. I tried to show it to you once before, but you decided you weren't ready to see it," Amelia revealed their prior trip into the room. "So I was forced to obliviate you."

Hermione gave a shocked gasp. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Not in my position," Amelia responded. "Harry was concerned that he would be unable to deal with bad news, so I used my better judgment."

"And you think I'm ready now?" Harry asked.

"After what has happened with Black, I think that you're not only ready, but that it is imperative you see this," Amelia said.

Turning, Harry quickly found the globe Amelia was talking about. Taking it gingerly in his hands, he could see swirling blue mists inside the globe. "What do I do with it?"

Before Amelia could answer, a woman's face appeared in the globe, causing Harry to almost drop it in fright. The woman in the globe then began to speak,

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches
Born to the woman who has thrice defied him, born as the seventh
month dies And the Dark Lord will mark the child as his equal, and

he will have power the Dark Lord knows not And one must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

The mists resumed their swirling, and the woman's face disappeared when she finished speaking. It happened all too quickly for Harry, and he was far from remembering the prophecy word for word. "Can I make it play again?"

"Just look into it," Amelia told him.

As he did and the woman began again, Harry spoke out loud with her, reciting the prophecy for his two friends. He did it twice just to make sure that they had gotten it all.

Hermione was white by the time Harry had finished for the second time. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Let me replace the prophecy, and I'll explain it to you." Amelia held out her hand to Harry. "May I?"

Harry held the sphere firmly in his grip. "Won't you go mad?"

"It only applies to taking it down from the shelf." Amelia took the sphere and replaced it. "Let's go back to my office."

Once inside her office, Amelia set up numerous wards. "Now we can talk. Where would you like to start?"

Harry had sort of grasped most of the prophecy but not all. "I didn't understand the bit about defying the Dark Lord."

"Albus was the first to believe that this part of the prophecy might well refer to your mother, Lily Potter, but we didn't know this for sure until You-Know-Who attacked your home. Up until then Lily had defied You-Know-Who twice. I myself had defied him on more occasions than that, as had Alice Longbottom." Amelia showed no pride in what she had done. "But as I do not have any children, I knew the prophecy could not be meant for me."

"And what about Alice Longbottom?" Harry asked.

"It wasn't her," Amelia said simply, not willing to go into what happened to Alice with Harry and his friends. "It was your mother."

"How did Harry's mother defy You-Know-Who?" Hermione asked, for the first time looking directly at Harry since they had shared the kiss.

Amelia had spotted the tension between the two children, and, wondering what was causing it, she also glanced at Harry, before continuing. "Lily was attacked by him one day when out in Diagon Alley, and she refused to let him by and into a store where families were buying Christmas gifts. You-Know-Who almost killed her that day, and only quick treatment by Severus Snape saved her life."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "Snape saved my mum?"

"He did," Amelia confirmed. "And while I know you do not like him, he is probably the most talented potions master there is, and as such extremely knowledgeable about the curse that hit Lily, and what was needed to counteract it."

Still barely able to believe what he had heard, Harry snorted. "Probably invented it himself."

"Harry!" Amelia warned, and when Harry apologized, she went on. "The second time happened when Lily was at dinner with James. James was seriously injured, and Lily refused to let You-Know-Who finish him off. That time, only the arrival of Aurors, alerted by a ring that James wore, saved them both."

"In the Mirror Room, You-Know-Who said that Mum wouldn't move aside when he wanted to kill me," Harry repeated what he had already told Amelia after his run-in with Voldemort, "which makes it three times that Mum defied him."

Having now solved this part of the prophecy, Luna queried another part. "The prophecy said something about marking Harry. How?"

"I think it was talking about Harry's scar," Amelia pointed to Harry's forehead. "However we have no idea why this would make Harry an equal, nor what the power the Dark Lord knows not is. Albus seems to think it's love, but I have to disagree."

Luna sided with Albus. "Daddy always said that love is the most powerful thing in the world, and that when he was with Mummy, he believed he could do anything."

However, Hermione sided with Amelia. "Romanic love is tosh, Luna. And besides, how could love kill someone?"

"I don't know." Amelia shrugged. "I'd be more willing to bet that the meaning has something to do with the power reading we saw from Harry today."

"And what about the last bit about surviving?" This part had chilled Hermione the most. She already suspected what it meant, but she was hoping that Amelia would tell her that she was wrong, but she did not.

"They both can't survive, so one of them has to die," Amelia said, her voice grave. "When it comes down to it, Harry, either you're going to have to kill him, or he's going to kill you."

Her suspicion now confirmed, Hermione put aside her confused feelings about Harry and how touching him made her feel, and she linked her fingers with his, wanting to comfort her friend. On Harry's other side, an equally concerned Luna did the same.

Harry was grateful for both girls' reassuring touch since he was experiencing the same fear they were. However, he still protested, "But You-Know-Who is nothing but mist."

"He's already tried to come back once, Harry," Amelia reminded him. "And if he succeeds the next time he tries, according to the prophecy, you are the only person who is capable of taking him down."

"But what about Professor Dumbledore?" Harry, like everyone, was aware of the rumors of how powerful the Headmaster was. "He beat Grindelwald."

"He did, Harry," Amelia had to concede Harry's point. "And like you, there was a prophecy about him, and he fulfilled it."

"Do you know how powerful Professor Dumbledore is?" Luna hoped it was really powerful, and that somehow Albus would be able to defeat Voldemort.

"I do," Amelia said. "I can't tell you exactly but I will tell you that he rates at over three hundred."

Harry's eyes widened. "I'll never be that powerful."

"I think you will." Amelia then let Harry in on a secret. "I'm considered relatively powerful; my own rating as a trainee was two hundred and nineteen, but it's grown to almost two hundred and twenty-nine. And as you've just shown, you're already more powerful than I am."

Harry was interested to learn this but it wasn't Amelia's power that concerned him the most. "What about You-Know-Who? Does anyone know what he registers?"

"I did. You-Know-Who was twenty-one when he applied for a teacher's license here, and it was then his power was measured as part of the application, but I suspect his power has grown since then." Amelia had been made privy to the information by the outgoing head of Auror Division, Edward Potter, before she took over from him.

"You-Know-Who wanted to be a teacher?" Hermione asked in amazement.

"Yes, but he wasn't always known by that name, nor even by Lord Voldemort," Amelia's mouth creased up with distaste as she spoke. "He was once known as Tom Riddle."

Harry frowned as the name rang a bell. "Riddle? I've seen that name somewhere before."

"Probably on one of the trophies in the trophy room at Hogwarts," Amelia suggested, having no idea that Harry had seen it on the diary that had killed Lockhart, when Severus had tried to give it to Harry. "Riddle was not only on the winning quidditch team being awarded the House Cup more than once, he was also lauded by most of the teachers, and he even won an award for special services to the school."

"What sort of special services?" Luna asked, intending to go look for the trophy.

"He helped to track down the person who was supposed to have opened the Chamber of Secrets." Amelia watched as Harry visibly flinched. "I can't prove anything, but I believe that it was Riddle himself who opened it."

"Who did he blame?" Harry asked, wondering if she would tell him about Hagrid, who Harry and his friends believed had been framed.

"I can't tell you that," Amelia said as she gave Harry a regretful smile. "His records have been sealed, and I cannot go against that law."

"But you told us about Riddle." Harry decided he preferred calling the man by his surname, rather than "You-Know-Who."

"Riddle is not an innocent, Harry, and I'm only sharing my beliefs about him." Amelia knew that what she was telling Harry about Riddle was skirting the law about privacy somewhat, but she didn't want this boy, who she had grown rather fond of, to be fighting in the dark. "Whereas the person Riddle framed is an innocent who did not deserve to have his name dragged through the mud. But unfortunately I am not in a position to prove that he was not guilty."

"I understand," Harry said, happy to learn that Amelia truly believed in protecting the innocent. "But you still didn't tell us what Riddle registered."

"I can only tell you that it was twenty points less than Albus registers now," Amelia said, before she stood up and looked down at the three seated children. "And on that bombshell, I think that concludes your time here as unfortunately I have another meeting I am unable to put off." She smiled gently at Harry. "Harry, if you need to talk about any of this, you know where to find me, although you may have trouble pinning me down to a specific time."

"I can always owl Daniel to find out," Harry said, well aware of how hectic Amelia's life was. And he was about to thank her and leave when it occurred to him that, having been best friends with Harry's father, Remus might already be aware of the prophecy. "Does Remus know about the prophecy?"

"I cannot answer that," Amelia responded, not willing to divulge the truth when it was Remus' responsibility to do so. "You would have to ask him yourself."

Harry decided he would do exactly that, and after he had hugged Amelia, and the girls had shaken her hand, the group left.

Next Chapter: Harry learns more about Sirius Black; Remus reveals his secret to the children; George receives a disturbing letter; Hermione is completely confused about her feelings.

Chapter 44: The Anonymous Tip-off

Potter Place

Once they arrived home from BritAD, Harry immediately sought out Remus. "We need to talk."

Remus could feel mixed emotions coming from Harry. "What about?"

"Did you know about the prophecy?" Harry asked bluntly.

"What prophecy?" Remus asked, a little thrown by Harry's comment.

"The one about me and Tom Riddle," Harry clarified.

Remus knew exactly who Tom Riddle was, and he therefore also realized what prophecy Harry was talking about. "I do."

Harry scowled. "Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Albus didn't want you to know about it," Remus responded, and then he asked, "How do you know about it?"

"Amelia showed it to me," Harry said.

"What are you talking about?" a confused Justin asked.

"Get Hannah and Lucy, and I'll explain everything," Harry said, deciding that, as Amelia suspected, he was going to fill his friends in on what was happening.

"Harry, do you think that is a good idea?" Remus asked worriedly.

"Hermione and Luna were there when I heard the prophecy for the first time," Harry revealed. "And although I'm not going to tell all and sundry, I am going to share it with the people I'm closest to."

"Harry, what about Susan?" Justin mentioned their missing friend. "She's still at the Weasleys until Sunday."

Harry remembered Amelia's warning, and said, "Amelia reminded me that Susan can be a bit loose-lipped, so I'm not sure I'll tell her, and definitely not Ron or Neville."

He then moved to the sofa to wait, and only once everyone was there, did Harry tell those not in the know about what had happened in the Ministry, about the prophecy, and Amelia's explanation.

Cordelia, who was seated next to Harry, was more than a little concerned. "But why can't someone else do it? Just because some batty old soothsayer says it is going to be you, I don't see why it has to be. She could be wrong."

"Prophecies don't work that way," Remus immediately said. "People have tried to circumvent prophecies before, and despite their best efforts, one way or another, the prophecy is fulfilled as it should be."

"You really believe in this hokum, don't you?" Cordelia asked.

"It is far from being hokum," Remus defended his beliefs. "Time and time again throughout recorded history seers have been making predictions, and as far as I am aware, they always come true, whether we want them to or not."

"So I don't have any choice," Harry said gravely. "I have to kill Riddle."

"I'm afraid so," Remus said, his voice filled with regret.

"Okay, so Harry has to kill him. But what do you think the power he knows not is?" Justin asked, his face pale at the thought of what his best friend was going to have to do.

"I have no idea," Remus admitted. "Albus thinks it's something to do with love."

Hermione snorted. "Madam Bones disagrees, and just like me, she thinks it rubbish."

"I have to agree with Hermione and Amelia," Cordelia joined in. "Spells kill, guns kill, but love most certainly does not."

Remus gave an example that contradicted Cordelia's opinion. "Look at Romeo and Juliet. Love killed them."

Cordelia disagreed. "They weren't real, Remus. But even if they had have been, love still doesn't kill directly, and I can't see Harry loving Voldemort" – Cordelia rolled her eyes when several of those gathered shivered but she changed what she had been saying – "okay, then, Riddle, to death. I'm sorry, but I think that it has to be something else, although I still don't believe it has to be Harry who must kill him."

It was obvious from her comment that Cordelia was far from being onboard about the whole prophecy thing, and so Remus used the example of Romeo and Juliet again. "Did you know that Romeo, or rather Romeus, was a wizard?"

Cordelia looked cynically at Remus. "They were just figments of Shakespeare's imagination."

"Actually, they really existed," Hermione interjected. "Daddy once took me to see the play, and he told me that Shakespeare based his story on a couple who died for each other in the 1300s in Italy. I can't remember what else he said though, and I had no idea that Romeo was a wizard, or that his real name was Romeus."

"Romeus was a wizard, and Juliet was a Muggle," Remus said when everyone looked to him for an explanation. "And they lived in Verona in the early 14th century. Romeus was a pureblood and he was therefore refused permission to court Juliet. Juliet's own family was also against the relationship, and so they plotted to join their daughter to another. In despair, Juliet came up with a plan so that she could be together with Romeus but it went horribly wrong. Believing Juliet dead, Romeus killed himself. When Juliet, who was far from dead, discovered what had happened, she also took her own life."

"Okay, so they died for love, but not from it." Cordelia accepted this part. "And as tragically quixotic as the tale is, I don't see what it has to do with the prophecy that has been made about Harry."

Remus got to the whole point of his story. "I'm telling you about it because there was a prophecy made about the couple. Romeus knew of this prophecy and did everything he could to try to

circumvent it, but it was to no avail. As predicted, the couple would die at the hand of love."

"I think it's really romantic," Luna sighed, and then she pulled a face. "But not the dying part."

Cordelia smiled at Luna. "That part was rather awful, wasn't it?" She then looked back at Remus. "And I understand what you're trying to tell me, but the whole Romeus thing took place hundreds of years ago. You know as well as I do that tales get distorted over the years."

Trying to get Cordelia onside, Lucy brought her own experience in to weigh. "Cordie, prophecies are real. I admit that I've never heard of the Romeus one before but then again I'm not the scholar Remus is. But I do know of many prophecies that have come true, and none that have not."

Cordelia finally gave in under pressure, but even then she did not admit to believing in prophecies. "Okay, so I might be wrong, but even if I am, I still do not believe that the power is love. If the prophecy is true, and I doubt it, then I think this power is exactly what it is supposed to be: power, pure and simple."

"Do you think it might be Harry's magical power? He registered two hundred and thirty-three on the Magus scale when Amelia measured him today," Luna informed the group.

Remus whistled. "James didn't measure anywhere near that."

"Amelia said that I should keep it quiet," Harry said, giving Luna a mock severe look.

Luna just stuck her tongue out at him, before turning back to face Remus who had begun speaking again. "She's right. You should keep this quiet. The element of surprise is always a good weapon."

"I only intended to tell those here," Harry said. "And I would trust all of you with my life."

As the group digested what they had discovered and fell silent, Remus decided to use Harry's declaration as an opening for

announcing his own secret. "In keeping with Harry's show of trust, I too have something I would like to share."

Guessing what he intended to do, Lucy glanced at Remus in alarm. "Remus, are you sure?"

"They deserve to know; both you and Cordelia already do. And as I'm going to be living here, they should be aware of what I am," Remus said. It was obvious though that he was nervous as he began pacing, and his words came out in a rush. "I'm not quite sure how to tell you this, so I'll just come right out and say it." He found himself faltering, but then squaring his shoulders, he began to blurt out, "I'm a..."

Recalling her suspicions from the start of the school year, Hermione almost immediately cottoned on to what Remus was about to say, and she interrupted his anxious declaration. "You're a werewolf, aren't you?"

Both Cordelia and Lucy gaped at the girl, not for one moment having suspected that Hermione had already guessed. Remus, however, was not entirely surprised that Hermione knew, for he rated her as one of the most intelligent young people with whom he was acquainted. "Yes, I am. But if you knew, then why didn't you say anything before now?"

"Because of Harry and Luna," Hermione responded, before explaining a little more. "I suspected you might be a werewolf from your eye color, and, after reading the section about werewolves in my textbook, I shared those fears with them. But they said that I couldn't go to a teacher to relay my concerns if I didn't know for sure." Hermione gave her two best friends a grateful smile before continuing. "And I would have been too embarrassed, and more than a little afraid, to accuse you to your face."

"You never showed any fear in class," Remus observed.

"Because I was never really certain," Hermione said. "However, that changed during the class where you banished the Boggart moon. I knew without doubt what you were then, and if you had not been tied up with Harry and Hannah, I think you would have noticed my fear. But afterwards, I talked to Harry and Luna again about my concerns. And after listening to them both, I decided that as long as

you did nothing threatening, then I would say nothing to any of the teachers."

"Thank you," Remus said. "But you should know that Albus is aware of what I am, as is Minerva."

"Told you!" Luna chimed in. She smiled brightly at Remus. "I also told Hermione that I didn't care if you were a werewolf, and I still don't." Although her crush had diminished from what it once was, Luna's belief in Remus' goodness still very much alive. "I know it isn't your fault."

Hannah, however, was gripping Justin's arm, her face revealing her fear. Remus turned to her, keeping his voice low and unthreatening. "Hannah, I can feel how frightened you are."

Through chattering teeth, Hannah managed to splutter out, "You're a werewolf, and you teach at a school. I thought the Ministry..."

"The Ministry doesn't know," Remus interrupted her. "If they did, I would have to register, and I would be unable to teach at Hogwarts."

Letting go of Justin, Hannah started to back up, fear overriding everything else. "But you could hurt someone. I know you could. I've read about werewolves, and they kill."

"I've never killed anyone," Remus said, keeping his voice soothing and mellow. "At least, not as a werewolf."

However, Remus' candor made Hannah all the more afraid. "But you have killed someone?"

"I fought against You-Know-Who in the last war," Remus said. "And yes, I had to kill in order to stay alive."

Justin, who had long been aware of Hermione's suspicions, and therefore was quite relaxed about the whole thing, moved over to Hannah and put his arm around his girlfriend. "Hannah, Remus won't hurt you. He's had plenty of chances at school if he wanted to do that."

"And I will never do so," Remus promised. "Hannah, I'm sorry that you're afraid of me. But I cannot help what I am, and at the time of

the full moon I take every precaution I can to ensure that I can't hurt anyone."

Hannah remained rigid in Justin's arms, and so he decided it might help his girlfriend if she knew what precautions Remus was talking about. "So what do you do during a full moon?"

"I spend the night in the Shrieking Shack," Remus said. "I lock the door inside the room I stay in, and the Whomping Willow is also there to stop me from escaping onto the grounds should there be a catastrophe." Remus could sense that Hannah was still unnerved, and so he revealed more. "But such a scenario is unlikely to ever happen, as I'm given Wolfsbane which helps me to keep my mind."

"Where does it go if you don't take Wolfsbane?" Luna asked blithely.

Remus smiled at Luna's quirky question. "If I didn't take Wolfsbane, I would have no memory of what I was experiencing as a werewolf. With the Wolfsbane I can remember everything from the moment I begin the change up until I'm human again, and I can control myself during the change."

Luna wondered if what she had read was right, and so she asked, "Does changing into a werewolf hurt?"

"Very much, and Wolfsbane means that the memory of the pain stays with you," Remus answered. "So I don't really like to think about it, let alone discuss it. But if I had to put it into words, I would say that it feels as though someone has torn me apart into small pieces before putting me back together into a shape that is from my worst nightmares. I hate what I am, and I live in dread of every full moon. However, I have little choice but to endure what I go through."

Across the room, Hannah was beginning to see the situation from a werewolf's point of view – something she had never considered before. And she could hear the pain in Remus' voice, and even though she was still nervous she asked, "Does changing back hurt as well?"

"Just as much. And it leaves you feeling almost unclean, to say nothing of feeling under the weather and rather weak for a few days." Remus' voice was bleak as he went on. "But the hardest thing is, is that you can't share this misery with most people. They're too

scared to deal with the truth, which means that they are also unable to see beyond their fear to realize that, for most of the month, I'm just another human being." Remus gave Hannah a sad smile. "So because of what happened to me at an age when I could not defend myself, up until now I have been forced to live most of my adult life alone, keeping the truth of what I am to myself."

Remus' comment made Hermione realize something. "You were a child when you were bitten?"

"I was six, and I almost died because of it," Remus said, his mind going back to what he had gone through. "There are times when I almost wish I had. The pressure of having to deal with my monthly changes, and how badly they affected me, ripped my parents apart. My Dad did everything he could to take care of me after my mother left but it got too much for him. He eventually had a fatal heart attack when I was fifteen."

Hannah was now very much embarrassed that she had thought so badly of Remus. She could not imagine what it must have been like for Remus to be such a small child, and to have to endure so much pain; nor how awful it must have been to have his mother walk out, and his father die. Hannah pulled free of Justin's grasp, and moved over to where Remus was standing. "I'm so very sorry, and I swear I won't tell anyone."

Remus was aware that Hannah was feeling awkward about closing the gap between them, and he therefore gently drew the girl into his arms. After releasing her, he looked down into her face. "Hannah, I understand why you reacted as you did, and if you ever have any questions about what I am, I want you to feel free to ask them."

"I will," Hannah agreed. Intending to rejoin Justin, she hesitated, coming out with a suggestion. "My Dad is a doctor. Perhaps if I ask him, he might have something Muggle to help you with the pain."

"I can't take painkillers with the Wolfsbane as they negate its effects, and in spite of the pain, I would prefer to be able to keep my mind," Remus responded. "But thank you for offering."

One by one each of the children hugged Remus before promising that they would say nothing. Harry, however, had questions arising

from what he had just discovered. "If you were like this at school, did Dad know about you?"

"He did, as did Black, and another of our friends, Peter," Remus said. "They learned how to become Animagi so that they could keep me company when I changed. We,..."

Harry knew from Remus that Sirius had been a friend, but it was only then that he realized how close the group must have been, and so he interrupted. "You were really good friends with Black?"

"Yes, I thought you knew that," Remus said in surprise.

Harry shook his head. "I was aware that you knew him from telling me about my parents, but I didn't know that you were that close."

"We were best friends," Remus clarified, before revealing even more. "There is something else I think you should know, Harry. I should have told you before now but you already had enough on your plate, and I didn't want you blaming yourself anymore than you already had done."

"This is something to do with Black, isn't it?" Harry guessed immediately.

Remus nodded. "Yes. Harry, he's your godfather."

Harry sat stunned, never once imagining that Remus was going to tell him news like that. "My godfather?"

"I was Jamie's godfather, and Black was yours," Remus said sadly. "James chose the two people he believed he could trust most in the world. A mistake that as a werewolf, I believe I should have spotted."

"So how did Black hide that he had joined Riddle from you?" Harry asked.

"I've always been unable to read him because he first owned the Black heir ring, and then, after his father died, the Black family ring," Remus began.

"I don't understand," Cordelia said, interrupting.

Luna held out her hand showing off the small silver rabbit embossed ring she was wearing. "My family ring has the ability to help me heal animals."

"Animals?" Hermione asked, her voice revealing that she obviously thought it a worthless power.

"My family has always had an attachment to nature," Luna said in defense of her ring, although knowing Hermione as well as she did now, she was not upset by her friend's disdain. "And even though the ring won't help save a mortally wounded animal, it will help save any animal that isn't hurt too badly."

"So different family rings have different powers?" Harry asked.

"Yes. The Black Family rings have the ability to block anyone from reading emotions, and to stop anyone from carrying out Legilimency." Remus could see that Harry had no idea what he was talking about. "Legilimency is the art where a user can invade your mind and extract memories; a really good one can determine if you are hiding something, and identify a true memory from a false one. I'm a fair Legilimens but far from an expert."

"So you wouldn't have known if Black hated you or not?" Cordelia asked in clarification. "Not as a werewolf or as a Legilimens?"

"No, but I still believe that I should have been able to detect something; some little indicator of what Black had become but I didn't," Remus said, his voice wracked with guilt. "And James, Lily, and Jamie died because I failed them."

"You didn't fail them," Harry said, trying to console him. "And even though it's not on the same scale, you trusted Black, just like I trusted Ginny." Harry continued when Remus shook his head in denial. "Remus, what happened wasn't your fault, just like you keep telling me that what Black has done to my friends and family isn't my fault."

"A taste of my own medicine?" Remus asked lightly.

"Yes, and I accept now that what has happened is Black's fault and not mine," Harry said, before returning to the subject of what had instigated the entire conversation. "And it's Black's fault that Mum

was able to thwart Riddle three times; if Black hadn't betrayed my parents, then that part of the prophecy could never have been fulfilled."

"It would have been, Harry," Remus reiterated his earlier comment. "Prophecies always are, but the circumstances of its fulfillment would have been different."

"And Mum still might have been alive," Harry said, with more than a little touch of bitterness in his voice.

"Yes, she might have been," Remus agreed. "And as much as I wish I could turn back the clock, and unfriend Black, I cannot. And part of me doesn't want to. It was Black who introduced me to James on the train on the way to school that first day. When we arrived, the Sorting Hat offered me both Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, and I chose Gryffindor to be with them. And it was James who was the first person, apart from my parents, who understood about what I am, and I wouldn't want to undo any of that, even despite what has happened."

Harry could see that it was bothering Remus terribly, and he squeezed the man's arm. "I totally understand, Remus. And I bet Dad wouldn't want you to undo it either."

"He wouldn't." Remus had known James long enough to be able to be confident in his retort. "And in spite of what Black became, he was the one who found out how to become unregistered Animagi, so that he, James, and Peter could keep me company when I changed."

"Didn't you use the Shack to change back then?" Hermione asked, recalling Remus' earlier comment.

"I did, but James figured out how to get past the Whomping Willow, and then up the passageway to unlock the door." Remus shook his head in dismay. "It was a stupid and foolhardy thing to do as Wolfsbane had not yet been invented, and I had no control over my natural urges. But back then we all believed that as Animagi, James and Black could control me. Peter was a rat and far too small to help."

"What was Dad?" Harry asked, not particularly interested in the form of Remus' other friend.

"He was a stag," Remus smiled as he remembered. But then the smile slipped. "Black was a large black dog."

"Does Amelia know?" Harry asked, a little worried to learn this piece of information.

"Yes, as do all the teachers at Hogwarts," Remus answered. "I didn't want to take the chance of him slipping onto the grounds in that form."

"Does the color of your Animagus form have anything to do with your allegiance, Dark or Light, or is it related to whether you are blonde or dark-haired?" Hermione asked, wanting to know more about Animagi – while she knew the basics, she was unfamiliar with the detail.

"Although the whole Black family is renowned for being a Dark family, the color of your Animagus form is dictated by your hair and skin coloring, and not your allegiances," Remus told her.

Harry now wondered why his father had ever befriended Sirius. "If the Blacks are well-known for their allegiance, why did Dad befriend him in the first place?"

"Even from quite an early age Sirius had always denounced his family's beliefs, and being sorted into Gryffindor only reinforced he was supposedly telling the truth," Remus said with more than a trace of rancor in his voice.

"What about the rest of his family?" Luna asked, like Harry intrigued to learn more about the Black family.

"Black had just one younger brother, Regulus, who was Slytherin through and through," Remus said. "From the moment he joined Hogwarts, Regulus was rather vocal about his beliefs that all Muggleborns should be banned from the school. But he became even more radical about them as he grew older. According to Black, Regulus likely became a Death Eater at sixteen, but he was probably entrenched in Riddle's plans long before then."

"Is he in Azkaban?" Luna asked.

"No, he was killed a long time ago, three days after Black's father died after being caught up in a fight with Aurors. Black believed his brother got in too deep, and Riddle had him killed when he decided he wanted out," Remus answered.

"And Black still served You-Know-Who even after he killed his brother?" Hannah asked, her voice full of incredulity.

"Like the rest of his family, he would have put his loyalty to his master first," Remus responded. "No matter what it cost."

"And even though Riddle is just mist, he's still serving his master even now," Harry said with a trace of fear in his voice.

A trace Remus felt. "I'll do anything and everything I can to protect you all. As I said, I blame myself for not spotting Black's deception."

"It isn't your fault, Remus!" Harry repeated fervently. "No more than it's your fault that I'm supposed to be the one to kill Riddle."

"I wish I could take that burden from you," Remus said sadly.

Harry gave a small smile. "So do I." He stood up. "I should go and get washed up." He not only needed to do that, but he also wanted some time alone to think things over.

One by one the children, and Cordelia followed suit, until only Lucy, and Remus remained. Lucy was concerned about Remus' revelation. "Are you sure you should have told them about you so soon?"

"Yes," Remus said, before giving a small smile. "I admit it's a novel experience to find so many people I can trust at once, but I trust them as much as I trust you."

"You trusted me because I found you passed out by the Whomping Willow, and I guessed," Lucy reminded him. "But even so, to be certain I would ask each of them to swear an oath to keep your secret."

Remus refused. "No. I'd rather be discovered than one of them pay for it with their lives if they make a simple slip-up."

Lucy understood, and she excused herself to begin making dinner.

Dinner turned out to be a good thing, with the children asking Remus more questions than they had during his initial confession, and Remus responding honestly to all of them. By the end of the evening, all of the children, including Hannah, were entirely comfortable with what Remus was. However, with Lucy agreeing with Amelia's statement that the girl could not keep a secret, it was decided that Susan should not be told.

Later that evening

Once everyone had gone to bed, Harry ended up hosting Luna in his bedroom. But theirs was far from a romantic tryst; in fact Harry was going to town on Luna about her actions in the restaurant that lunchtime. "What on earth possessed you to kiss me like that?"

"I wanted to make Hermione jealous," Luna told him. She beamed at Harry. "And I think I did."

"I think you embarrassed her," Harry retorted. "And I have to be honest; I felt embarrassed as well." After Luna apologized, Harry continued. "I know you didn't mean any harm, but you should know that I'm not going to continue with this pretence. It isn't right to deceive everyone like this."

A remorseful Luna had to admit that Harry was right. "Okay. But let's give it a week, and then call it quits, saying it didn't work out. That way Hermione won't find out how you feel about her, and it won't seem odd."

Harry was reluctant to do so, but aware that Luna's point was valid, he agreed. "Fine, but no more kissing."

"We'll stick to hugging," Luna promised, and she held out her arms. "And you can start with a goodnight hug for me."

"Apparate back to your room," Harry said after hugging the girl. "I don't want Remus or Cordelia jumping to the wrong conclusion if they run into you."

"Bye," Luna said, and she vanished, her crack seeming rather loud in the quiet night.

Harry only then lay down, his mind on Hermione and the mess Luna had gotten him into. He had no idea that Luna's whacky idea was going to become his alibi.

The Next Morning

After hearing a knock at the door, Harry yelled out. "I'll get it."

After checking who it was, Harry opened the door. Not expecting what was about to happen, Harry had no chance to defend himself as George's fist connected with his face.

Having been right behind Harry, Hermione gasped in horror as Harry hit the floor. "George, what are you doing?"

George stood over Harry, a piece of parchment in his hand. "Tell her!"

"Tell me what?" Hermione asked.

"He asked you to join him last week because he's after you, and he's trying to steal you from me," George responded. "Someone sent me a letter telling me about it."

Luna had by now joined them, and she helped Harry up, putting her arm around his waist, before telling George, "I don't know what's in that letter of yours, but Harry is going out with me."

George was more than a little taken aback. "But the letter said..."

Luna held out her hand. "May I see it?"

George handed it over. "Whoever wrote it said that Harry had been kissing Hermione, and that he fancied her."

Hermione's heart plummeted, but Luna was already disparaging what had been written, especially as there was no name to the letter.

"You're going to believe what some anonymous idiot wrote over trusting Hermione?"

George was now put on the spot. Things between him and Hermione were already rocky enough, and he had no wish to make things worse by saying he could not trust her. "No, but the letter seemed genuine."

"May I read it as well?" Hermione asked, taking the letter when Luna offered it to her.

'Weasley

I thought you should know that your girlfriend has not only been learning to apparate this week. She's also been locking lips with the Boy Who Lived, and he intends to take her from you. In fact, I bet they're together right now.

A concerned friend.'

Despite the partial truth of the letter, Hermione was disgusted. "A concerned friend? They didn't even have the decency to lay claim to their allegation."

"It doesn't matter whether they did or not,' George snapped. "Did Harry kiss you?"

Hermione shook her head, and was able to answer truthfully. "No, George, he didn't."

George still did not know what to think, and so he glanced over at where Luna was using her cardigan sleeve to wipe Harry's lip clear of blood. "And they're really a couple?"

Luna swung around, genuinely more than a little angry. "Is it so hard to believe that Harry could like me? Or are you like everyone else who believes I'm loony Luna?"

George realized he was digging himself a very big pit if he said 'yes', and so he did the only thing he could. "Of course not, Luna."

Luna gave George a very uncharacteristically angry look, and turned her back on him. "Come on, Harry. We need to clean up your face."

"Wait!" George called out. "I think I might have made a mistake."

"Think?" Luna asked in a sarcastic voice, her anger at George helping her to play a part she would normally have fallen down on. "Think?"

George walked over to Harry, holding out his hand. "No, I know I made a mistake, and I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have jumped to the wrong conclusion without asking first."

Harry wanted to refuse George's hand, and say that he was not entirely wrong. But he could not do so without revealing the truth about Hermione kissing him, and Luna's subterfuge, and he therefore shook hands with the older boy. "It's quite alright. I'd have done the same thing."

Hovering in the background, Remus could feel guilty emotions coming from both Harry and Hermione, and he immediately guessed that contrary to George's newly formed opinion, his original one might well have been true. He therefore decided to try and find out what was going on before things blew up again at some point in the future. "Harry, Luna, come with me. I'll fix Harry up."

Harry and Luna excused themselves, and followed Remus into the study that Harry had said he could use.

"I'm going to get straight to the point," Remus said, as he used his wand to repair Harry's lip and clean him up properly. "I thought there was something off with you and Luna announcing that you were getting together last night." He saw Luna's face contort, and he held up a hand. "And don't think it's because I think you're mad or unworthy of dating Harry, because I don't."

Luna gave Remus a small smile. "Thanks."

"But having said that, I want to know why the two of you are lying about your relationship," Remus demanded.

Luna glanced at Harry, who nodded. "Harry likes Hermione, and...." Luna then related the entire story of what had happened.

Remus now understood why Hermione was feeling terrible. "So you didn't kiss Hermione back?"

Harry shook his head. "No, Sir."

Remus determined that Harry was telling the truth. "I believe you, and from what you've told me, I also believe that what Hermione did was a mistake. I could sense just now that she feels guilty, Harry, and more than a little upset."

Harry gave Remus a tight smile. "I didn't think she meant the kiss when it happened, and I didn't take it as such."

"And yet you went along with Luna's scheme," Remus said in a disappointed voice.

"I didn't want to reveal how I feel about Hermione, nor that Luna was lying," Harry said, more than a little embarrassed.

"Just tell me that you have no more plans to meddle in George and Hermione's relationship, and I think we will consider this matter at an end," Remus decided.

"I won't, Sir," Harry immediately said.

Remus then turned his attention to Luna. "And you, young lady, should be ashamed of yourself."

"But..." Luna began.

Remus interrupted her. "No, Luna, there is no 'but'. I'm well aware of what you believe, but you had no right to interfere in something that is none of your business. By doing so, you've placed Harry in an untenable position, and although I know you had good intentions, it was wrong to do so."

A tearful Luna visibly drooped, and she told Remus what she and Harry had agreed the night before. "We had already decided that we were going to tell everyone that we had realized that a relationship between us wouldn't work."

Remus again sensed that this was the truth. "I'm pleased to hear it."

Luna sniffled. "I'm sorry, Remus."

"It is Harry you should be apologizing to," Remus said, pointing at the dark-haired boy.

Luna immediately turned to Harry. "I'm sorry if I upset you, Harry."

Harry hugged his friend. "It's okay, Luna."

As Luna hugged Harry back, Remus gave her a stern final warning. "Just make sure you never do anything like this again, otherwise I will be a lot less lenient than I have been this time." As Luna began to cry, Remus, a sucker for tears, softened a little. "Luna, I understand you only want people to be happy, but trying to manipulate a situation as you did is immoral, and I know you're better than that."

Luna swallowed several times and wiped away some of her tears, but she was unable to stop crying. "I really am sorry."

"I know you are." Remus reached out and drew the girl towards him, letting her cry on chest. "Harry, why don't you go on ahead? I'll come out with Luna when she's feeling better."

Unable to hug Luna again, Harry instead squeezed her shoulder. "I'll wait for you in the dining room. We can tell everyone then."

Note: I split the chapter up as it was getting rather large, and so in the next chapter: Hermione derails Luna and Harry's plans; Cordelia discovers Justin in a compromising situation; Albus receives a strange missive from Petunia Dursley

Chapter 45: Boy Trouble

Potter Place

Despite their best intentions, Luna and Harry had no chance to tell anyone anything about the dissolution of their false relationship: George and Hermione had disappeared; Cordelia and Lucy were still out shopping together, as they had been when the whole letter incident blew up; and Justin and Hannah were also out. With only Remus attending dinner later that night, there was also no opportunity there. And by nine o'clock, it was evident that it would be better to leave things until the morning.

However that was changed by Luna being woken up by Hermione. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you," Hermione said, wringing her hands together. "It's about what happened today."

Luna got out of bed, and put her arm around Hermione. "What is it?"

"The letter was telling the truth about the kiss," Hermione confessed, the letter's content having eaten away at her all day. And although there was no way she could tell George the truth, she felt that she at least owed it to her best friend. "I'm so sorry, Luna. I was really excited about completing my point to point jump, and I kissed Harry – it wasn't a proper kiss or anything like that, but I feel terrible about it. Can you ever forgive me?"

Luna rushed to assuage those feelings. "Don't feel terrible, Hermione. I'm not angry, and as you said, it's not as if it was a full-on kiss. And besides, Harry and I have decided that maybe we're not right for each other."

"Is it because of what I did?" Hermione asked, now feeling even guiltier than she already did.

"No." Luna shook her head, now feeling just as bad as Hermione. But she was unable to tell Hermione the truth without confessing Harry's feelings and breaking Harry's trust. "We were going to tell everyone this evening that it was over but no-one was around to tell."

"I've felt so awful about doing that to you," Hermione said, hugging her friend. "And I'm sorry about you and Harry."

"Don't be," Luna said, hugging her friend back. She finally understood what Remus had been trying to tell her about meddling, and she thoroughly regretted what she had done. But since there was nothing she could do about it, she decided to see how things between Hermione and George had panned out. "So how did it go with you and George today?"

Hermione slumped down, and bit her lip. "Not great. Things between us are worse than you know."

Luna's heart gave a little jump of joy, but she also felt bad that Hermione was obviously upset. "What do you mean?"

"We've been arguing a lot more than I've told you about, and..." Here Hermione stopped, and then, with a blush suffusing her cheeks, she continued. "And some of it is because George wants to take our relationship further."

Luna was a little lost by the comment. "Further than what?"

Hermione looked at her friend in exasperation. "Further than just kissing and cuddling, Luna!"

"Oh!" Luna exclaimed, also blushing. "And you don't?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not ready." She sighed. "But it's not just that." She met Luna's eyes again, a guilty look on her face. "I don't feel anything when he touches me."

Luna wondered how far things had progressed. "Um, how far have you gone?"

Hermione blushed all the more. "He's touched me; only over the top of my bra, but that's not the point."

Luna hoped she had gotten the point as she asked, "So you're worried that you won't feel anything at all if he goes further than just touching you over the top of your clothes?"

"Yes," Hermione said dejectedly.

Luna hesitated. She had no experience in these sorts of things, and she therefore had no clue as to what to suggest.

Hermione mistook her hesitation as embarrassment. "I'm sorry. If Mummy had been here, I would have asked her what to do. But she's not, and I can only really trust you and Harry not to mention anything to George, and I can hardly talk to Harry about this, and so I was hoping that..."

Luna placed her hand over Hermione's mouth. "Hermione, calm down."

Hermione drew in several deep breaths as Luna removed her hand. "I'm sorry but I'm so confused. I've tried to write down how I feel, to try and make sense of things but I'm going around in circles."

Luna thought about who she would want to talk to under the same circumstances, and she therefore made a suggestion. "Hermione, I don't know what to say to you, and I'm not sure that Harry would either if you did talk to him about this. So why don't you talk to Aunt Cordie?"

Uncomfortable with that idea, Hermione immediately shook her head. "No."

"Then how about Hannah? I trust her, and I also know she's gone further with Justin than just kissing." Luna had surprised the couple in the Potter library, and Justin had had his hand up Hannah's blouse. "So maybe she might have some idea about what you're feeling."

Hermione debated Luna's suggestion, and she decided that given her limited options, Hannah would be the better way to go. "I'll go and talk to her now. She came in about twenty minutes ago, and hopefully she's still up."

Hannah was still up, although she had intended to slip into Justin's room and 'talk' to him. "What's up?"

When Hermione didn't say anything, Luna explained. "Hermione's have boy trouble, and I didn't know what to tell her, so I suggested

she come to you. But I think she's a little scared about telling you what's bothering her."

Hannah wasn't entirely sure how qualified she was to deal with Hermione's problems, but she nevertheless led Hermione to the sofa. "What's wrong?"

Relaxing a little, Hermione began to blurt out her problems, her words tumbling out in a continuous stream. "I like George, and he wants to marry me, have children, and live with his parents. And I don't want that. But I do want to be his girlfriend. And what makes it worse is that I kissed Harry, just like the letter said Harry had done, and when George kisses me, I don't feel the same way. And I don't know what to do about it."

"You kissed Harry? And what letter? And what feelings?" Hannah asked in confusion.

A little calmer now that she had gotten the tough part of the way, Hermione gave a brief description of what had happened when she had been apparating, and the aftermath. "And now I feel guilty that when George touches me I feel nothing, but just brushing up against Harry makes me go all shivery inside."

Hannah, like Luna, was a little stumped as to what to say. "Hermione, I don't know what to tell you."

Hermione visibly deflated. "I really hoped you would have the answer."

Hannah gave an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

Hermione was about to get up and leave, when she recalled what Luna had said about Hannah having gone further than kissing, and Hermione wondered if having a benchmark might help her to get some perspective on her problems, and so she asked. "Hannah, how do you feel when you're with Justin?"

Hannah shifted uncomfortably, and glanced at Luna. "Um..."

"Don't be shy because I'm here," Luna interrupted. "I got over Justin ages ago."

"Please!" Hermione begged when Hannah started to shake head. "It's important."

Hannah was silent for a few moments, and then, with a soft look on her face, she began. "I want nothing more than to be with Justin all the time. When he's not there I feel as though something is missing. And when we're together, I love just being held by him. But when things go further than that, I melt inside."

"You mean you two have done it?" Luna asked, having an abundant curiosity about sex.

"No!" Hannah said, blushing. "But even if we had, what I'm trying to say is that being with Justin makes me feel good, and it's horrid when we're apart."

Although she was disheartened by what Hannah had said, Hermione finally had something to which she could relate. "I'm glad when I get time apart from George, but I do like him, and I missed him during last week. But although I like being held by him, I don't like him touching me intimately."

Like Luna had, Hannah wondered how far the couple had gone. "What do you mean by 'intimately', Hermione? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

Hermione went red yet again as she repeated what she had told Luna. "He's only touched me over my bra."

"And you really don't like it?" Hannah asked in surprise; she turned into a figurative puddle of goo when Justin touched her breasts.

"Not at all," Hermione admitted. She then went further. "And I know it's a horrible thing to say but the thought of being married to George, and having to have sex with him, makes me want to run and hide."

"Then perhaps you should think again about your relationship," Hannah suggested, finally knowing what to say. "To enter into a marriage, a successful marriage, you have to want that person with all of your being, and you have to love them, flaws and all." She gave a small smile. "At least, that's what Mum told me when she had a girly chat about Justin, just in case things ended up becoming serious."

"And are they serious?" Luna asked, as nosey as ever.

"Yes, they are," Hannah admitted. "I'm head over heels in love with Justin, and I can't ever see that changing." She glanced at Hermione. "But you don't feel that way about George, do you?"

Hermione bit her lip, and shook her head. "No, but that's because I don't believe in romantic love; just compatibility."

Personally Hannah thought that Hermione was mad, but she nevertheless rephrased the question to suit Hermione's own views. "So do you think you and George are compatible?"

"I thought we were until he mentioned marriage, and I kissed Harry again," Hermione said dejectedly.

Justin, being the discreet soul that he was, had never mentioned anything to Hannah about the kisses, and so she was unaware of the other times, forcing her to ask, "Again?"

Hermione told Hannah about sharing her first kiss with Harry, and the time when he had been revived in the Chamber. "It was so nice that for a brief moment I forgot George was in the Chamber when Harry kissed me." Hermione sagged, dropping her face into her hands. "It's making me so confused."

"You need to focus on your feelings for George, and not on the attraction you and Harry have between you," Hannah decided, thinking that Hermione was already bewildered enough with her guilt over her lack of response to George.

"But I'm not attracted to Harry!" Hermione denied immediately, her head shooting up. "And besides, I'm going out with George."

Hannah thought that Hermione was protesting just a little too much. "Hermione, it's perfectly alright to be attracted to someone other than the person you are going out with." To prove her point, Hannah made a confession. "I think Blaise Zabini is hot, and he's a Slytherin."

Luna giggled in delight. "I do too."

"I thought you liked Remus," Hermione said, before clamping her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, Luna." She gave a tiny scream of frustration. "I'm not only useless in relationships but I'm turning into a blabbermouth as well."

Luna was unaffected by Hermione's accidental slip. "Hermione, you're just upset, and I know you would never let me down when it counted."

"But I just blabbed about you fancying Remus," Hermione argued.

Luna merely shrugged. "It's only us girls here, and anyway, it doesn't matter anymore. I like someone new now, and I think Remus likes Aunt Cordie, and that she likes him."

"Luna, she lost her husband two months ago," Hermione pointed out. "There's no way Cordelia would have moved on so soon."

Hannah had to disagree with Hermione. "Luna might be right. Remus looks at Cordelia differently than anyone else, and he speaks more softly to her. And Cordelia acts the same way around him, but you probably haven't noticed because you haven't been here. Justin and I spotted it a few days ago." She did not mention, however, that Justin had spotted a lot more than that.

"I bet he's upset about it," Hermione said, aware that she would be if she was in Justin's shoes, and it was her mother who had moved on so quickly.

"Actually, he's not," Hannah said, surprising Hermione. "I mean he's not thrilled but he's okay with it, particularly if it makes his mother happy."

"I love it when couples who are supposed to be together work out." Luna glanced over at Hermione as she spoke.

Hermione scowled at her friend. "Just because I reacted to Harry's kisses does not mean that we are meant to be together."

After what Hermione had told her, Hannah had to disagree. "Perhaps you are, Hermione, and, because you don't want Luna's prediction about you and Harry to be true, you're trying too hard to make your relationship with George work."

Hermione gaped at Hannah as she gleaned what the girl was hinting at. "You think that I'm denying that I might want to be with Harry?"

"Yes!" Luna jumped in, excited at the prospect.

Hannah held a finger to her lips. "Luna, hush."

Luna fell silent, as did Hermione. A few long moments passed, before Hermione made an admission. "Harry is my best friend, and I admit I like spending time with him, and when he kisses me it makes me feel good; better than any kisses I've ever shared with George." Hermione hesitated as she recalled exactly how good those brief moments she had shared with Harry had been, but then she came back to herself. "But I also really like George. He makes me laugh, he's always willing to listen to me, I like spending time with him, and..."

"And what?" Hannah prompted Hermione when she trailed off.

Hermione bit her lip before finishing her sentence. "He's told me that he loves me."

"You sound almost guilty about that," Hannah pointed out.

"That's because I can never tell George I feel that way about him, and I know that's what he wants to hear," Hermione said regretfully.

"Why not?" Hannah pressed.

"Because I don't want to lie and say I believe in something, when I don't," Hermione said.

"And you shouldn't if you don't feel that way," Hannah agreed, glad that her mother had had a talk with her about feelings since it was making it far easier for Hannah to relate to Hermione's problems now that she had something to base her advice on. "But in the same vein, if you know deep down that you won't ever return George's feelings enough to marry him, then you are lying to him, even if you don't think you are."

Hermione was now even more lost. "So what do I do?"

"I think you need to think carefully about how you honestly feel about George," Hannah suggested, after a few moments' deliberation. What she actually wanted to say was that if she had been Hermione and went all shivery inside when someone else touched her, she would have dumped George in a heartbeat. But she knew that this was not what Hermione wanted to hear, and so instead she went with the lesser of two evils. "And I think you should spend some more time away from George until you've decided that you really want to be with him."

Hannah's gentler option was still enough to cause a mild panic in Hermione, and she looked up in alarm. "But what would I say to him? I can't tell him about Harry, and what we've just discussed."

"You can tell him that you're still trying to deal with what he wants from your relationship, and that you still need some time to sort things out," Hannah outlined what she would say in Hermione's position.

"And what do I do about Harry?" Hermione asked, glad that things were beginning to become a little clearer.

Hannah would have gone with jumping on him and kissing him silly. But again, she knew that Hermione did not want this sort of advice. So instead she said, "I think that you should ignore how you feel about Harry's kisses. If you aren't intending to kiss him again..."

"I'm not," Hermione interrupted.

"Then you shouldn't be worrying about Harry," Hannah finished.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief as she decided that what Hannah was saying made perfect sense. "Thank you, Hannah. I've been overcomplicating matters trying to figure out both Harry and George, so I'm going to take Harry out of the picture."

Luna was disappointed. "So you're just going to pretend that Harry doesn't make you feel good?"

"No," Hermione said. "I can't pretend I don't feel something, but I can ignore it. As I won't be kissing Harry ever again, then I should discount those feelings, and concentrate on how I feel about George."

"So what exactly will you tell George?" Hannah asked.

"Just that I need some space to figure things out; not that it's over between us or anything like that," Hermione decided. "I can tell him on the train back to school." She then smiled at Hannah. "Thank you so much. It was one of those I can't see the wood for the trees problems, and you really helped."

Hannah hugged Hermione. "I'm glad."

Luna looked askance as Hannah followed her and Hermione. "Where are you going?"

"To see Justin," Hannah said. "It's our last chance to be alone before school begins again."

"Are you two going to...?" Luna asked.

"No!" Hannah exclaimed hurriedly, and she opened her door. "But I wouldn't tell you if we were!"

Luna was miffed that Hannah refused to tell her. "Spoilsport."

Hannah grinned at Luna. "I am, aren't I?" Then smiling, she let herself into Justin's room, and Hermione and Luna continued on towards Luna's room.

Once inside, Hermione made a request of her friend. "Luna, I have a massive favor to ask of you."

Wanting to make up for deceiving her friend, Luna immediately said, "Anything."

"I know you and Harry are going to tell everyone that you're splitting up, but do you think you could ask him to wait a few days? After the letter incident, I don't want George thinking I'm putting space between us because of Harry." Hermione felt a little mean asking for the favor, but just like George, she really did not want to make things worse than they already were between them.

Luna found herself hoisted with her own petard, and despite what she and Remus had discussed, she had little choice except to agree to continue the relationship. "No problem. I'll go ask him now."

Luna could hear giggling as she passed Justin's room, and she found herself wishing that she too was in a relationship. And as she passed Cordelia's room, she found herself hoping that whoever she met would make her as happy as Justin seemed to be making Hannah. Her musing ended when Cordelia's door handle began to turn, and so Luna quickly apparated away.

Along the corridor, in the master suite, Harry was pacing up and down, his thoughts in turmoil, when Luna apparated into his room. He quickly picked up his dressing gown and put it on. "Luna, I wasn't expecting you."

Luna was glad that Harry had at least been wearing boxer shorts, but she still blushed. "Sorry. I wanted to tell you that I told Hermione that we already think things aren't going to work out between me and you."

Harry was relieved. "So we can end it then."

"No."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean, no?"

Luna told him what Hermione had requested she do. "So we're still going to have to go through with this."

Harry's happiness drained away. "Great."

"I'm sorry," Luna apologized.

"You stopped George from stomping all over me, so don't be," Harry said, not wanting Luna to feel too bad. He then wondered what else the girls had discussed. "Did she say anything about the kiss?"

Luna now had to lie. "No, Harry."

"Did she say anything about me?" Harry asked. Luna winced, and Harry caught the motion. "She did, didn't she?"

Caught out, Luna nodded. "Yes." But just as she had been unable to reveal the truth to Hermione about Harry's feelings, Luna now found herself faced with the same situation, only in reverse. Luna therefore decided to tell Harry something he already knew. "She said that she thinks of you as her best friend."

Harry's face fell but his voice was sure when he responded. "At least now I know that that's all she feels, and I can do something about it."

"What do you mean?" Luna asked in alarm at the determination in Harry's voice.

"I can't mope after Hermione forever, Luna," Harry said, deciding enough was enough. "Even with what's happened, she still doesn't view me in the same way I see her. So I'm moving on."

"Moving on?" Luna hoped that Harry didn't mean what she thought he meant.

He did. "Once our little charade is over, I'm going to find a girlfriend."

"But, Harry..." Luna started to try to convince him to rethink his new objective.

"No, Luna," Harry interrupted. "I'm done with hankering after a girl who is never going to want me."

Luna had no choice but to accept Harry's decision. But she made one last attempt to sway him from his newly chosen path. "I still think you should be with Hermione."

"But I don't," Harry said miserably. "Not anymore." He then hugged Luna, hoping she would get the hint that he wanted to be alone. "Goodnight."

She did get it, and after bidding him goodnight as well, a dejected Luna left Harry's room.

Just seconds after Luna had vanished on her way to Harry's room, Cordelia opened her door to find no-one there, although she could have sworn she had heard a crack. The thought vanished like smoke on a breeze when Remus' door opened, and she smiled at

him as she made her way along the corridor. "Checking up on me, Mr. Lupin?"

"I was beginning to think I'd been stood up," Remus admitted, as he stood by to let Cordelia into his room.

"I couldn't decide on what to wear," Cordelia said, blushing.

"You look wonderful no matter what you're wearing," Remus said gallantly.

"Liar!" Cordelia headed by him and sat down on the sofa in front of the fire, shivering as she did so. "It's freezing in here."

"We can sit in bed or I'll grab you a blanket," Remus suggested.

"I think the bed," Cordelia decided, wanting to be really close to Remus since this was their last night together before he returned to Hogwarts.

"No funny business from you, though. I'm not that kind of man," Remus warned as he led Cordelia over to his bed.

Cordelia gave a gurgling laugh. "I bet you are."

"There's only one way to find out," Remus said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Aware that Remus would never take liberties unless she invited him to do so, a fully clothed Cordelia slipped into bed, and gave a happy sigh. "It's rather toasty in here."

"I didn't think you were coming, so I used a warming spell to ready it for when I go to bed," Remus explained.

"But the room is freezing," Cordelia pointed out, plumping her pillows.

"I like a cold room but a warm bed," Remus said, slipping in beside her, and putting his arm around her, so that she was forced to lay her head on his chest, the pillows going by the wayside. "Is that better?"

"Yes," Cordelia said. Then she sighed. "I'm going to miss our chats, and I really wish you didn't have to go back to Hogwarts."

Remus already knew this, Cordelia having said it almost every evening during the last week. "I wish I didn't have to go back either."

Unable to concentrate with the steady and rather loud drumming sound of Remus' heart beneath her ear, Cordelia wriggled free of Remus' grasp and sat up, leaning on her elbow. "Have you decided if you will return next year?"

"I sent Albus a note today saying that I'm not going to," Remus revealed. "I have no wish to end up like my predecessors."

Aware of what had happened to Remus' predecessors, Cordelia gave a shiver. "It would be awful if anything happened to you."

"Nothing is going to happen," Remus reached up and touched Cordelia's cheek.

"You don't know that," Cordelia said softly. "And the thought of losing you when I've only just found you frightens me almost as much as..."

She faltered, and Remus asked, "As much as what?"

"My feelings for you." Cordelia gave a nervous laugh before plunging on. "I know it's ridiculous to be talking about feelings so soon, especially after we discussed taking things slowly last week, but I can't help myself."

"Cordie..." Remus tried to interrupt.

"No, let me talk," Cordelia demanded, wanting to try and explain. "When Edmund died, I thought I wanted to be alone, to have some time to find myself..." She hesitated trying to find the right words, before going on. "...but these two weeks have made me realize how much I need you."

"Cordie, you're stronger than you think," Remus said, stroking her hair off her face. "You don't need me."

"But I do," Cordelia said. "At first I thought it was because I was lonely, and I started wondering if I wasn't clinging to you because of that. Then I thought about life without you, and I realized that I don't want to be with you just because I'm lonely. I want to be with you because you're you. And that frightens me."

"Why?" Remus asked.

Cordelia took several deeps, and then told Remus the truth. "Because I'm afraid that just when I've found someone I can love, something will go wrong, and I'll lose you."

Remus reached for a shaking Cordelia's hand, kissing her fingertips. "You won't lose me."

"I've probably already frightened you off with my ranting," Cordelia said, her tone almost fearful.

"Actually you haven't," Remus said. "And there's something I want to say to you."

Cordelia immediately butted in, almost afraid to hear what he had to say. "Remus, you don't have to..."

Remus pressed his mouth against Cordelia's silencing her before lying back down, placing her hand on his chest. "Let me say my piece." When Cordelia said nothing, he began. "Cordelia, I haven't said anything up until now because I didn't want to come on too strong too quickly, but given what you've told me, I think you should know that I feel the same way about you."

Cordelia's eyes widened with amazement. "You love me?"

Remus gave a wry smile. "Yes. I think I fell in love with you that first time we met. You were so beautiful..."

"I looked awful," Cordelia denied it automatically.

"No, you didn't," Remus disagreed. "As corny as it sounds, you looked like the woman of my dreams, and I was delighted when we were left alone. I felt so comfortable with you, and I wanted to stay and talk to you. And I was completely resentful when Justin and

Hannah came out and disturbed us; it was then that I knew that I'd fallen for you."

"But you'd only just met me," Cordelia protested. "You couldn't have fallen in love with me then."

"But I did," Remus refuted Cordelia's statement. "However, you were married, and I therefore quashed my feelings. I certainly didn't ever expect to see you again, and especially not on the floor of a forest in the dark."

Cordelia gave a tiny shudder as she remembered. "I was so frightened. I wish I'd known that you were there to rescue me, and who you were."

"My main concern was getting you out. Identifying myself didn't occur to me." Remus looked up at Cordelia. "And although I know we wouldn't be together like this if he had survived, I would have done the same for your husband if I had been able."

"I know that," Cordelia said, her hand gently stroking Remus' face. "But if he hadn't died, then, as you've just said, we couldn't be together, and I'm not sure I could bear that."

"You don't have to," Remus reminded her. "I'm going to be here for you, for always."

Cordelia decided to tease Remus, to ease the intensity of what they were sharing, which really did frighten her. "Always, Mr. Lupin? Don't think you might get just a teensy bit bored of me?"

"I'd never get bored with you, Ms. Graham." Remus spoke lightly. And he was about to continue in the same playful tone, when he was shocked to his core by the notion that what he was saying was true, and his voice became more serious. "Not even if we spent a hundred lifetimes together."

"Now I know you're lying," Cordelia giggled, believing that Remus was joking, but then she noticed how intensely he was staring at her. "You... you mean it, don't you?"

Remus nodded. "I love you, Cordelia, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

Cordelia's hand flew to her mouth. "Remus, I don't know what to say."

"If yes is not the answer that springs to mind, then I do believe that we should shelve that idea," Remus said, finding himself more than a little disappointed, even though the proposal had been a spur of the moment thing. "It was far too soon, and..."

Cordelia shut him by kissing him. When she finished, she smiled. "I was just shocked, and my answer is yes."

Remus extracted a squeal from Cordelia as he rolled her over onto her back, covering her with his body, and kissing her soundly. When he rose up, he said softly. "I think you've just made me the happiest man alive."

Cordelia couldn't help but giggle at the contented look on Remus' face. "I think you might be right, but I know how to make you happier."

Remus knew immediately what she meant, and he shook his head. "I want to wait, Cordelia."

Cordelia's mouth fell open in surprise. "But why?"

"Because I want it to be special," Remus said, as he rolled off her. "I don't want our first time to take place when we're sneaking around behind your son's back."

Cordelia shifted and sat up. "I don't like doing it either. But I can't tell Justin that I've just become engaged to you less than three months after his father died, so what choice do I have?"

"I don't know," Remus declared, also sitting up. "But now that it's come up, I feel like a hypocrite. I reamed out both Harry and Luna this morning for being deceitful about their relationship, and here we are doing the same thing."

Cordelia had to admit that Remus had a point. "You're right. I'm going to have to be honest with Justin."

"I'm not saying do that," Remus said. "I know that you don't want to hurt him by telling him that you've moved on so soon."

"So what are you saying?" Cordelia asked nervously. "That you want to end things?"

"No. Just that perhaps being together in here isn't a good idea," Remus said.

"But we've only been talking," Cordelia pointed out.

"Up until now, we have," Remus accepted her point. "But you more or less indicated that you want things to go further."

Cordelia was caught between a rock and a hard place. Now that she had declared her feelings, and discovered that Remus felt the same way, Cordelia wanted to feel even closer to him by making love, but she also did not want to deceive her son. "I do want that, but you're right, we are being dishonest, and so perhaps I should go back to my room."

Remus hated kicking Cordelia out. "I'm sorry. I'll walk you back."

"I think I can manage," Cordelia responded a little snippily.

"You're angry with me, aren't you?" Remus asked.

"No," Cordelia said with a pout. "I'm angry with the world for placing me in this position."

"Come here," Remus said, tugging Cordelia against him. "I know I'm being a stick-in-the-mud, but I'm just trying to do what is right."

"I know," Cordelia said disconsolately.

"Look, how about we have a cup of tea downstairs, and talk in the family room?" Remus suggested.

Cordelia brightened. "It will be cold down there as well. I'll go fetch my dressing gown to put on over my clothes, and meet you in the kitchen."

"I have a spare gown," Remus said, and slipping his own on, he found a slightly warmer and much longer one for Cordelia.

She grinned at him, as she looked down to where the dressing gown was skimming her ankles. "It's a little large."

"I think you look adorable," Remus said, and kissed her nose. "Come on."

As they walked along the corridor, just like when Luna had gone by the door, Cordelia caught the sound of laughter coming from Justin's room. "That doesn't sound like my son laughing to me."

"It's not," Remus confirmed. "It's Hannah's laugh."

"I'm afraid the tea will have to wait," Cordelia said, and she reached out and tapped loudly on the door.

Justin and Hannah looked at each other in horror when they heard a knock at the door. "Who do you suppose it could be?"

When Cordelia's voice drifted in through the door, it became apparent who it was. "Bloody hell! It's Mum. Get dressed."

"Where's my blouse?" Hannah asked urgently, tugging her skirt on.

"Here." Justin shoved it into her hand, and then, after pulling on his dressing gown, he called out when another knock sounded. "I'm coming."

Cordelia thought her son looked rather flushed when he answered the door, and although she had already deduced what was happening, she smiled and asked, "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Justin said. "What's up?"

"I need to speak to you about something," Cordelia said. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." Justin had little choice but to step aside.

Hannah was sitting on the edge of Justin's bed, her blouse now on, trying to look innocent. But Cordelia was unable to ignore the state

of the rumpled bed, the fact that Justin was in his robe, and that Hannah's bra was poking out from under the bed. Picking up the bra, she dropped it on the bed by Hannah and said, "I think you owe me an explanation as to why Hannah is in your bedroom at eleven o'clock at night."

"We were just doing the same as you've been doing," Justin retorted in a surly voice, feeling embarrassed at having been caught out. He then made things worse by deciding to clarify what he meant by 'the same'. "Well, not exactly the same. I haven't had sex with Hannah."

Cordelia's mouth tightened, and her anger was evident in her voice as she asked, "I beg your pardon?"

Justin shifted uneasily, but he met his mother's eyes. "It's obvious, Mum." He looked his mother up and down. "I mean, you've even got his dressing gown on."

Cordelia opened up the gown. "I'm fully dressed, Justin."

"You are now but you weren't a few nights ago." Justin said in protest, before plunging on. "I went to your room to talk to you, and you weren't there. So I went downstairs to look for you, and on my way back, I saw you leaving Remus' room. Your hair was all messy, and you were only wearing your nightgown."

It was now Cordelia's turn to feel uncomfortable, and, just like Justin had, she too went on the defensive. "That was rather late to be up, wasn't it?"

"I wasn't with Hannah if that's what you mean. I had had a bad dream, and I couldn't get back to sleep." Justin turned red as he admitted to his need for some comfort. "I know you usually stay up late reading, and so I thought I'd talk to you for a while, and that's when I saw you."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Cordelia asked.

"I was too embarrassed," Justin said. "And what was I supposed to say?"

"You could have accused me of doing exactly the same as you just did; that I was sleeping with Remus," Cordelia said in an acerbic tone.

Justin colored. "I'm sorry, Mum. I shouldn't have said that."

Cordelia did not want to get into an argument with Justin over what had happened, especially as she had been just as remiss in her own actions. "Justin, I accept your apology. However, I do need to know if you and Hannah have slept together."

"I swear we haven't," Hannah finally spoke up, her face as red as Justin's.

Cordelia felt a wave of relief wash over her. "I'm pleased to hear it." She looked back at Justin. "But before you go to bed, I think we should talk about what's happened tonight."

Remus offered to take Hannah out. "Perhaps I should take Hannah back to her room, and give you and Justin a little time alone."

"She can stay," Justin said immediately. "I have nothing to hide from Hannah."

Cordelia reluctantly nodded, indicating that both Remus and Hannah should stay. "Let's start with what you were doing. You're both underage, Justin."

"We just wanted some time alone," Justin said in his defense. "Things may have gone a little further than I intended. And I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"I'm willing to accept your word," Cordelia decided, as Justin usually tended to be a truthful boy. "But in future, Hannah is not allowed in your room after nine o'clock, and I don't ever want to find you in a situation like this again. If I do, then Hannah will no longer be staying here at all."

"I understand," Justin said, and waited expectantly.

Cordelia knew that he was waiting for her to address her own situation, and so she apologized. "Justin, I'm sorry you found out about Remus in the manner you did."

Justin used the opening to ask, "Why didn't you just tell me that you were dating Remus? Why hide it?"

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't take it very well," Cordelia said, "especially as it was so soon after Edmund died."

"Mum, I know you and Father didn't have a good marriage," Justin revealed.

"You knew?" Cordelia asked in surprise.

"Yes. Changing your last name back to Graham so quickly sort of gave it away, but that's not how I found out," Justin said, and then he apologized. "Mum, I'm sorry but all the staff knew."

Cordelia was horrified. "How?"

"I don't know," Justin said, shrugging his shoulders. "But I found out about you and Father when I overheard David talking to his girlfriend in the stables about the situation. After that I just kept on watching you and Father together. It was really obvious you were unhappy, but I didn't know what to do to help."

"There was nothing you could have done," Cordelia said. "My unhappiness had everything to do with Edmund and how he treated me."

"Why didn't you leave him?" Justin asked, feeling angry at his father.

"Because there was you to consider," Cordelia said. "And you were far more important than my happiness."

Justin swallowed hard. "I'm not."

"To me you are," Cordelia responded, taking her son's hand, and pulling him towards her. "I would give up anything for you; you're my son, and I love you."

"I love you too, Mum," Justin said, hugging his mother back just as fiercely. When he parted, he glanced at Remus. "And if you ever need to tell me anything, just do it. I'd rather be upset than lied to."

Cordelia caught the glance. "Remus was not the one who wanted to hide this. I was."

"But I went along with it," Remus said, taking his fair share of the blame, "which was just as bad."

Justin was glad that Remus had not left his mother to take the blame; something his father would have done. "It's okay, but next time please just tell me if it's something as important as this."

At Justin's words, Cordelia glanced at Remus and held out her hand. When he moved to take it, Cordelia turned to face Justin. "In that case, we have something else to tell you."

Justin wondered if his mother was pregnant. "You're going to have a baby?"

"No!" Cordelia denied it immediately. "Remus has asked me to marry him, and I've said yes. But if it makes you unhappy then I won't do it."

Justin had no wish for his mother to give up on her happiness for him yet again. "Get married, Mum. You deserve to be happy." At Cordelia's snuffle, Justin made a bit of joke, trying to alleviate what he considered to be a bit of an overly emotional motion. "And then you'll no longer need to sneak around late at night like a crazy teenager!"

Cordelia gave a happy laugh, wiping her eyes. "I really should have told you sooner."

"At least you've told me now," Justin said, and after more hugs and one handshake, he yawned. "I'm shattered."

Cordelia decided it was time to break things up. "In that case, I think Hannah should go back to her own room, and Remus and I should also be heading off to bed."

"Actually, Remus, can I speak to you before you go?" Justin asked as Hannah joined Cordelia by the door.

"I'll take Hannah back to her room, and I'll see you in the morning," Cordelia said, having a feeling that she knew what was about to be

said by her son. She also decided to forgo spending the night with Remus, having decided that she wanted their first time special, and not taking place after an evening like she had just had. "Remus, I'll see you in the morning as well."

Justin waited until Hannah and his mother had left, before saying his piece. "As a werewolf, I know you could rip me limb from limb but if you hurt my Mum, I will kill you."

Remus had to hide a smile at Justin's fervent defense of his mother. He was actually rather impressed that Justin had the guts to stand up and say it at all. "I would never deliberately hurt her, Justin. And I will do all I can to make her happy, just as you appear to be doing with Hannah."

Justin colored at what Remus was intimating, and he immediately became defensive again. "We haven't gone as far as you and Mum have."

Remus decided to clear things up. "Actually we haven't made love yet. We've mostly been spending our late nights talking and getting to know each other. In fact, contrary to what you've just said, I suspect you and Hannah have gone much further than we have, and I also have a sneaking suspicion that you were heading towards taking that final step this evening."

Justin colored all the more. "I don't know if we were."

From Justin's reaction, Remus suspected that Justin and Hannah had had every intention of having sex that night, even though they both did not turn sixteen until November. But Remus did not call Justin on the evasion; instead he offered his help. "Justin, I'm not your father, and despite the fact that I'm going to marry your mother, I have no intention of trying to fill that position. However, should you ever need any advice, or if you just want someone to talk to who isn't your mother about this sort of thing, then I'm willing to listen."

"I'm good," Justin said.

"Then I'll say goodnight." Remus turned to leave, only to stop when Justin called out his name. "Yes?"

Justin sighed heavily, suspecting that Remus had already guessed he needed some male counsel, hence the man's offer. "Actually, I would like some advice."

"What about?" Remus led Justin to the sofa to sit down, and then he threw some logs on the dying fire to give Justin a little time to compose himself.

On the sofa, Justin twiddled his fingers, and looking anywhere but at Remus, he blurted out, "Sex."

"Sex covers a great deal, Justin, so without being too crude, I would need to know more," Remus said, moving to sit down by Justin.

Justin knew the basics, and it therefore wasn't actual sex he needed the advice on. "I only know about Muggle contraception. But I'm aware, from having overheard some of the older boys talking, that there's a magical alternative."

Remus acknowledged that there was. "There is. But by telling you about it, I don't want you to take it that I'm sanctioning your sleeping with Hannah."

"I know that," Justin hurried to reassure Remus that he understood.

"Okay then." Remus was a little bemused that he was about to have 'the talk' with Justin. "First of all you should always remember to use a silencing spell."

Justin blushed when he realized that he had forgotten to apply one to his room. "We forgot, didn't we?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Your Mum heard Hannah laughing."

Justin could have kicked himself. "That was really stupid."

"Sometimes we get carried away, Justin, and what is happening in the moment is far more important than remembering a simple spell," Remus told him. He then moved on. "Not that I would recommend forgetting to cast a contraceptive spell."

"I was going to use a Muggle condom," Justin said, his face burning.

Remus wondered if Justin realized that he had just admitted to his intentions for that night. "Well, you should know that Muggle condoms don't always work." Remus could remember a Muggleborn complaining about them. "And that magical contraception is always far more effective if the spell is properly cast."

"How do you cast it?" Justin asked, most definitely not wanting to get something like that wrong.

"Just like you would cast the levitation spell, with a swish and flick. It's the same for all the contraceptive spells that are available," Remus explained.

Justin filed this knowledge away, before asking another question. "Are some spells better than others?"

"Yes, and I would suggest going with the strongest contraceptive spell possible." Remus knew he was going to embarrass Justin horribly with his next words. "The one I prefer, and would therefore recommend, is a rejection based contraceptive spell, which expels everything from the body. The incantation is 'Denego Sperma', and it is used after making love."

Justin wanted to sink through the floor but he really did have no-one else he felt he could ask about these things. Like him, Harry certainly had no idea. And he had considered asking George, but he really didn't get along that well with the Weasley twin, even though everyone else did. "What else is there?" As he asked the question, he once more looked anywhere but at Remus.

Remus had felt just as ill at ease when Sirius had been explaining about wizarding contraception. Remus' own father had been a Muggle, and therefore had had no knowledge of such things, and his mother had already left by then; not that Remus could have talked about it with her. "There's also an almost equally effective spell, which will kill any emissions – the incantation is 'Accido Sperma'. Unlike the first one, this is used before you make love."

Justin cringed. "Are there any spells without the word 'Sperma' in them?"

Remus wished he could ease Justin's discomfiture but there was little he could do about it, and so he continued. "Yes, but they substitute 'Semen' instead."

Justin groaned. "It's going to be so embarrassing saying any of them."

"Not as embarrassing as having to tell Hannah's father that she's pregnant," Remus said drily.

Justin had to acknowledge that Remus was right. "He'd kill me."

"I doubt that but as a responsible parent he would be extremely angry," Remus said, and he placed a hand on Justin's shoulder, before giving him a warning. "Justin, I know from experience how tempting it is to want to take that final step. But you really should only do it if you're both ready, and if you are both willing to live with the consequences if something does happen."

Justin found himself wishing that his father could have been as understanding as Remus was being. But in giving Justin the Muggle version of 'the talk', Edmund had been more interested in warning Justin that he had better find a 'suitable' girl, and that he should get the job done properly and provide an heir. Justin believed he already had a 'suitable' girl in Hannah, but he was far from prepared to complete the final part of Edmund's demands. "I'm not ready to be a father yet."

"Then you should wait," Remus suggested.

Getting to his feet, Justin acknowledged Remus' suggestion. "I think we'll do that."

Remus also stood up, and recognizing that Justin had asked all he was going to, he again reiterated his offer of his help. "As I've already said, while I know that I can't ever replace your own father, if you should ever need to talk about this or anything else, my door is always open."

Justin politely held out his hand. "Thank you, Sir."

Remus shook it, before pulling Justin into a brief hug. "I'll say goodnight, and let you get some sleep."

"Goodnight, Remus." Justin said as Remus let himself out.

Slowly the dust settled from the various incidents that had happened at Potter Place, but the evening still sent ripples out, changing what might have happened otherwise.

On the morning everyone was due to return to Hogwarts, Cordelia and Remus made a hurried visit to a jeweler to make their relationship official. However, as they picked out the ring, they decided that they would wait to marry until the school year had come to an end.

Justin and Hannah had a frank talk on the train on the way back to school, and although they both wanted to go further, they both agreed that Remus was right, and they should wait.

Also on the train, Hermione told George that although she cared for him deeply, she was far from ready to say yes to marriage, and that she still needed some time. George, although upset, accepted Hermione's stance, and he agreed that they should talk more about it in a few weeks' time, after Hermione had decided what she really wanted.

The repercussions continued as, once everyone had returned to school, Harry and Luna quietly ended their pretence of a relationship.

Then one week after that, Harry was as good as his word about moving on, and asked out Samantha Brown, Lavender Brown's younger sister, who was a third year in Ravenclaw, and who Harry knew from playing quidditch. Having secretly adored Harry since she had started school, Samantha immediately said yes.

And two days after that, deciding that she had been an idiot to think that Harry might have had even the smallest attraction for her, Hermione ended her break from George, even though deep down, she still had some major reservations about doing so. And although Hermione was quite adamant that she was not willing to take their physical relationship further at that time, George was so delighted that she had ended their estrangement that he bought her a small promise ring. And Hermione found herself once more on a path that deep down she did not really want to be on.

May 12th 1995

Albus opened up the letter he had received just moments earlier, and frowned before begrudgingly getting to his feet, "Minerva, I need to go and speak to Petunia Dursley."

Minerva was surprised. "What does she want?"

"She doesn't say," Albus handed Minerva the brief missive. "Just that it's very important she gets the opportunity to speak to me today."

"You're going now?" Minerva asked as Albus started to gather up his cloak.

"There's something not quite right," Albus said. "I don't know what it is, but I do recognize desperation when I read it."

Minerva had to agree after she had finished reading the short note. "She's almost begging."

"Which is very unlike Petunia Dursley," Albus remarked. "Now if you will excuse me, I should be going."

Minerva handed back the letter, and Albus disappeared.

Next Chapter: Albus is told a very strange tale; Severus has news for Tom; Tom makes plans for Sirius' next attack.

Chapter 46: A Very Strange Tale

Petunia greeted Albus after he was admitted by the Auror outside. "Thank you for coming."

Albus was rather surprised by the woman's politeness but he put it down to her change in circumstances. "Your letter sounded urgent."

"Let's go into the sitting room and talk," Petunia suggested. "I don't want Dudley to overhear us."

Albus followed Petunia into a small but tidy sitting room. "Are you finding the accommodation comfortable?"

"It's adequate, thank you." Petunia held out a hand. "Please sit down."

Albus did as she requested before speaking again. "I was surprised to receive a letter from you saying that it was most urgent that you speak with me. What can I do for you?"

Petunia got straight to the point. "I want you to remove Dudley from this house."

"I thought the accommodation was adequate," Albus responded in a confused voice. "I therefore don't see any reason to move him."

"I don't suppose you do, but I have good reason for my request." Petunia paced up and down as she spoke. "I'm going to die tomorrow, and I don't want my son anywhere near this place when I do."

Albus' face reflected his surprise. "I don't understand."

Petunia rephrased her comment. "I have less than twenty-four hours to live, and, as I have no idea how I'm to die, I need my son to be moved to a place of safety."

"This house is perfectly secure," Albus assured her. "There is always an Auror standing guard, and..."

"You don't understand," Petunia interrupted impatiently. "No matter if there were four or forty guards outside of this house, I will still die tomorrow."

"I think you're still a little on edge from your run in with Sirius Black," Albus began.

Petunia interrupted him again. "Hardly! But I need you to believe me when I say that I know without doubt that I'm going to die tomorrow."

Albus asked, "How do you know?"

"My mother warned me that just before I died, I would know," Petunia said as she finally sat down. "And I therefore know that tomorrow is that day."

"But your mother was a Muggle, and had no magical powers, especially none of foresight." Albus had met Rosemary Evans on more than one occasion.

"My mother was immortal and all-knowing," Petunia responded. She was not surprised by the doubting look on Albus' face. "I haven't lost my marbles, if that's what you're thinking. This body," here she ran a hand down her front, "isn't truly mine. I was forced to inhabit it by my mother."

Albus was now starting to get a little concerned about Petunia's mental state. "And your mother is?"

"Her name is Nyx." Petunia could see that Albus was familiar with the name. "You know who she is, don't you?"

"According to myth, she was the mother of many children, the most famous of which are the Sisters of Fate," Albus confirmed Petunia's question.

"It is rather fitting you mention them, for I am Atropos," Petunia announced in rather a grand voice.

"Indeed?" Albus ran a hand down his beard, minor concern changing to extreme worry. "If you were Atropos, then you would know that legend says that Atropos did a great wrong, and was banished from the world of immortals never to be seen again."

"Well, that's not quite true," Petunia responded, "for I'm here."

"Forgive me for saying this, but Atropos was supposed to possess great beauty." Albus felt a little uncomfortable in pointing out Petunia's lack of attractive attributes.

"That is true, and now I know who I am, I've avoided looking in the mirror." Petunia could see that Albus thought she was insane. "I can tell you don't believe me."

"It is a rather far-fetched story," Albus said gently.

"But it's true," Petunia said urgently. "Provide my son with protection, and I'll not only prove it, but I'll also provide you with some very valuable information."

Albus didn't know whether to be intrigued or worried. "What sort of information are we talking about?"

"Bring me a pensieve, and I'll show you one of my memories, as well as providing the information," Petunia offered.

Albus still wasn't convinced. "Why should I?"

"Because I want to secure my son's safety," Petunia responded. "And you have nothing lose to by granting my request, so what is the harm?"

Deciding that he should return with help, Albus slowly nodded. "Very well, I will return shortly."

When Albus walked back in, Petunia stared at the man with him. "Who is this?"

Albus introduced his companion. "This is Healer Simmons, and..."

Petunia interrupted him. "I don't need medical help. I need a pensieve. Now do you have one?"

"No," Albus admitted.

Petunia immediately dropped to her knees. "I've never begged like this before but I will now. Please help me."

Albus had never known Petunia to be so subservient before, and although he still did not believe her story, he nodded, and dismissed the healer. "I'll bring you a pensieve."

When Albus returned again, he had what Petunia had requested, and he placed the pensieve on the table. "So what are you going to show me?"

"You'll see, but obviously you need to take the memory," Petunia said, waiting patiently.

Albus tried several times to remove Petunia's memory and failed. "I can't extract it."

"It must be my mother's doing," Petunia announced in frustration.

Albus was by now seriously disturbed. He had never failed to extract a memory from anyone before; especially not a squib. He therefore believed that Petunia was suffering from sort of brain injury, although he had no idea what might have caused it. But whatever it was, it was obviously interfering with his extraction of her memory. "Petunia, I think we should take you to see a healer after all."

"I don't need to see a healer," Petunia said crossly. "You think I have something wrong with me, but I don't." She folded her arms. "My name was..., is, Atropos. My sisters are Clotho and Lachesis, and my mother is Nyx. I was forced into this body as a final punishment for failing my mother's test."

"Test?" Albus asked, wanting to see how far gone Petunia really was.

Petunia nodded. "Yes. I threw my lot in with the wrong person. I believed that this person was to rule over me, and I wanted to get on his good side by offering information he would never had gained access to otherwise. But it turned out to be nothing more than a test, and one I failed miserably."

"And this is your punishment?" Albus asked.

"Not exactly," Petunia said. "My punishment lasted for over a thousand years as I was forced to inhabit mortal body after mortal body, each new life more miserable than the last. It was made worse by the fact that I knew who I really was, and what I had been forced to give up. Finally my mother set me one very last test, one in which I could redeem myself. She stripped my memory of who I was, of what I had done, and of what would be lost if I failed."

"And I take it that you believe you have failed this final test?" Albus asked, absolutely convinced that Petunia had taken leave of her senses.

Petunia gave a wry laugh. "Failed is an understatement. I have shown no mercy, no kindness, and precious little generosity in this lifetime, and so I will die as a mortal, and pass over as a mortal. If I had passed this final test, then I would have retaken my place as Atropos and become immortal once more."

"You seem rather accepting of the whole thing," Albus said, still playing along.

"I have little choice," Petunia acknowledged. "But I do have the choice in making sure that my son is cared for." She gave a small smile. "He's probably the only thing I've ever cared for, and he's a part of me that will live on, even if no-one else will ever know."

Albus was now certain that Petunia could not be left alone; and especially not alone with Dudley. He therefore asked her about her plans for him. "What will happen to Dudley if you are unable to care for him?"

"I have already changed my will." Petunia nodded to a brown envelope sitting on the table. "I do not want Dudley to go to Marge Dursley. She is a cruel woman, and she will teach my son to become even crueler than he already is." Petunia did not miss Albus' surprised look. "I may love my son, but I can also see his flaws, and even though the woman I was would never have admitted to them, as Atropos, I will." She waited for Albus to take the envelope. "Please, pick it up. It contains my wishes."

Aware he would need the will if he had Petunia committed, Albus picked up the envelope. "So where do you want him to go if you can't take care of him?"

"To a family that will teach him how to do the right thing," Petunia responded. "If you know of any good families willing to take him in, then I will be forever grateful."

"I will do my best to place him with a good family," Albus promised, before bringing up something that was puzzling him. "But why did you ask me to do this? I know that you hate me."

"That is true." Petunia did not bother to hide her feelings. "But quite perversely I also trust you. Despite our differences, you have always kept your word, and I expect you to do so now when it comes down to my son. Dudley is my only child, and I'm fearful that something will happen to him if he stays with me."

Albus now believed that Petunia's request was a cry for help from a woman who was afraid she might harm herself and, maybe even her son. "Given what I have discovered, I would like to move you and Dudley to Hogwarts, at least for tonight."

"I don't want Dudley anywhere near me," Petunia reminded Albus.

Albus had already decided that that would be best. "I will place you in separate areas of the castle, where you will both be safe."

"No matter what you do, you won't be able to stop my death," Petunia said.

Albus disagreed. "I believe that in Hogwarts we will thwart whatever you believe might be coming."

After a few moments deliberation, Petunia decided that Albus was right about Dudley's safety, although she had no expectations as to her own survival. "To say that, you do not know my mother. But I am agreeable to the change."

"Then please pack, and I will escort you both," Albus declared. "I will return shortly." After asking the Auror to wait inside until he returned, Albus made a quick trip back to Hogwarts.

Dudley had whined about moving but after portkeying – something he had discovered he rather enjoyed – Dudley found himself gaping in awe at the sight of Hogwarts, Albus having bypassed the wards to

allow them to alight right outside of the front door. Dudley's next words revealed that, like his mother, he was a squib. "This building is where the fre..." he stopped as he caught Albus' eye, and changed what he was about to say, "...Potter goes to school?"

"Yes." Petunia placed a hand on Dudley's shoulder. "It's quite magnificent, isn't it?"

"It's sweet," Dudley responded.

When Albus stepped into the building, the first person he saw was Severus, and he beckoned to him. "Severus, would you please show Dudley Dursley to the guest quarters in Slytherin?"

"Where's Mum going?" Dudley asked, not budging.

"To talk in private with the Headmaster, sweetie," Petunia said, patting Dudley's cheek. "So be a good boy for Mummy and go along with the teacher."

Dudley left with Severus, and Petunia turned to Albus. "Snape would not have been my first choice to take care of Dudley."

"The Slytherin guest quarters are the hardest to locate in the entire school," Albus told her. "And as such, I decided that Dudley would be safest in them."

Petunia reconsidered. "Then I am happy for him to accompany Snape." She looked around. "Where are we going?"

"To my office." Albus led the way up the stairs, and up the corridor until he came to a gargoyle.

Petunia joined Albus on the moving staircase. "So at long last, I'll get to enter the hallowed Headmaster's office."

"You will." Albus opened the door into his office, and held out his hand. "Please sit down."

Petunia had never been inside the room before, and she swung around, taking it all in. "It's quite grand."

"I actually thought it was rather cozy," Albus remarked, and he removed his cloak. "Would you like some tea?"

"Please." Petunia sat down.

Albus had alerted Poppy that Petunia would be in his office, as well as what he suspected, and he greeted the nurse when she arrived just moments later. "Madam Pomfrey, this is Petunia Dursley."

Petunia's face contorted with anger as she realized why Poppy was there. "I am not sick. I am telling the truth."

"Let me just check you over," Poppy said in a firm but kindly voice.

Petunia glared at Albus while Poppy ran her wand over her several times. "This is a waste of my precious time."

"I just want to make sure you are in good health," Albus said.

After a few minutes, Poppy shook her head. "I can't find anything wrong with Mrs. Dursley, Headmaster. She's in perfect health, and I see no reason why you were unable to extract her memory."

"I've already told him why," Petunia snarled, getting more than a little frustrated that Albus obviously did not believe her.

Even after knowing her for less than five minutes, Poppy already thought that Petunia a rather unpleasant woman. "Is that everything, Headmaster?"

"Yes, thank you, Madam Pomfrey." Albus smiled at the nurse, who then departed. After closing the door to his office, Albus moved to sit down behind his desk.

Petunia continued to glare at him. "I told you earlier I was well, and yet you refused to believe me."

Albus could see that Petunia was furious. "Petunia, you must forgive me. But your story is hardly credible."

"Then explain why you couldn't extract my memory," Petunia demanded.

"I don't know," Albus had to admit.

"You couldn't extract it because my mother has obviously tampered with it," Petunia said. "She obviously doesn't want me to share my memories with anyone else." She gave a small vicious smile. "But she won't stop me. I need to make sure that Dudley is taken care of."

Albus tried to tell her that Dudley would be taken care of, no matter what happened. "Petunia,..."

Petunia held up her hand. "No, I'm going to tell you whether you want to listen or not." And she launched into her story without giving Albus another chance to stop her. "This all began when my sisters and I learned that a man was destined to take over the immortal world." Petunia suddenly stopped and looked at Albus expectantly. "Shouldn't you be writing this down?"

Resignedly Albus took a quill out, and asked, "And this man was named?"

"Thomas Seville; he's an Australian billionaire, or at least he was in the world I knew him in." Petunia was pleased to see Albus writing the man's name down. "And he was going to unite something known as the Pillars of Heaven and Earth. They don't exist in every world, but where they do, Muggles know them more commonly as the Four Pilasters, and wizards, the Four Pillars. And if Thomas had succeeded he would have been granted immortality, and would have had a chance to rule all worlds."

Despite believing this to be a fairy tale, Albus found himself rather intrigued, and he interrupted to ask, "All worlds?"

"For every action a decision is made, and for every decision made there is a world where the exact opposite choice was made, which means that there are millions upon millions of worlds out there," Petunia explained what she meant by her comment. "If Thomas had succeeded in uniting the Pillars, he would have been able to rule all of these worlds as well as the immortal one. Unfortunately I have no idea if the Pillars exist in this world, but in the last world Thomas Seville inhabited, they were made up of four items." Petunia then set out what they were, before going on. "And Thomas managed to acquire all four of them, aided by his wife, of all people."

Albus raised an eyebrow. "The way you say it makes it sound unlikely she should have helped him."

"If she had known at the time that he was once called Lord Voldemort, I doubt she would have," Petunia remarked in a sage tone.

Albus slowly shook his head, and softly said, "Petunia, Voldemort's real name is Tom Riddle, not Thomas Seville."

"I know that." Petunia could see that Albus still did not believe her. "Just as I know that Voldemort didn't come from the world in which he became Thomas Seville."

Albus was now absolutely convinced that something was very wrong with Petunia, despite Poppy's assertion that there was nothing medically wrong with the woman. "Is that so?"

"Yes, he ended up there after facing off against a version of Harry Potter, who forced him through..." Petunia's voice trailed off. "You think I'm making this up, don't you?"

"Yes," Albus answered honestly. "Wouldn't you if you were in my shoes?"

"I would have thought that the great Albus Dumbledore would at least give someone the benefit of the doubt," Petunia countered.

Albus acknowledged this with a nod, and he unenthusiastically decided to allow her to carry on. "Then please continue."

"As I was saying, Voldemort was forced into the Propylaeum." Petunia stopped in her tale to clarify what it was. "The Propylaeum is the name of the archway that lies in the Ministry that the wizarding world has been using to execute their criminals."

"So why didn't Voldemort die if he was pushed through it?" Albus asked, picking up on what he considered to be a flaw in Petunia's tale.

"Because the original builder did not intend for the Propylaeum to be used as means of execution; it was meant as a form of

transportation." Petunia spoke as if she had been able to see into the past. "And if you are carrying one of the Deathly Hallows, such as the wand you currently possess, then..."

Albus had never hidden the fact that he possessed the Elder Wand from those in a secret organization he had headed up. However, he was surprised that Lily had shared this information with her sister. "You recognized my wand?"

"It's the Elder Wand," Petunia said knowledgeably, "and I'm willing to bet that you acquired it in a duel with Grindelwald."

Albus acknowledged the truth in this. "My duel with Grindelwald is included in many books, including *Hogwarts: A History*."

Petunia let out a long sigh. "I know this from very different means but that is neither here nor there."

Not wanting to get into a debate, Albus brought the conversation back to where it had been. "You were saying about the archway?"

Petunia returned to where she had left off. "Now, when Voldemort was pushed into the Propylaeum, he was carrying a Deathly Hallow."

"Let me guess," Albus interjected, his voice slightly derisive. "Was it a ring?"

"Yes, but Voldemort actually had two hallows: the ring that had Cadmus Peverell's resurrection stone inset into it, and the Elder Wand, but Voldemort was only holding the wand when he was forced through the Propylaeum." Petunia spoke surely and steadily, as if she truly believed in what she was saying. "Voldemort lost the ring when his arm was cut off by a magical weapon. But then, quite stupidly, those idiots on Voldemort's original world threw his severed arm into the Propylaeum, allowing Voldemort to regain the ring once more."

Albus presumed that Petunia had read about the ring in Lily's school books, although he did wonder how she knew the ring contained a resurrection stone. "And I suppose he rose up and overthrew the new world he entered?"

Petunia shook her head. "Actually he did not. Missing an arm severed by a magical knife meant that it could not be rejoined, which was a problem as far as image was concerned. And so Voldemort tracked down an object known as the Corpus Verto that would allow him to swap souls and gain a new body. The person who owned the Corpus was one Thomas Seville. And after he met with the man, Voldemort used the Corpus to take over not only Seville's body, but also to steal his identity, his memories, his power, and his money."

"I've never heard of the Corpus Verto," Albus said, his belief now even more steadfast that this was just a delusional tale. He therefore decided that he had been more than patient, but he was unwilling to waste his time by listening further. "Petunia, I think that this has gone far enough. I would suggest that you might want to lie down. I'll ask that Dudley be sent to you, but I'm afraid his visit will need to be monitored."

"No!" Petunia barked out. "I do not want my son anywhere near me. I want him to be kept safe."

"You're both safe," Albus said gently. "Nothing can harm you here."

"And I need you to believe me when I say that I know differently," Petunia responded. "And you need to know that you are in very real danger if you don't find the four Pillars if they exist here."

"Petunia, please..." Albus intended to beg her to stop.

Petunia shook her head. "I know you don't believe me, but I have kept my end of the bargain. And so I want your word that you will do everything you can to protect my son, which includes keeping him away from me, at least for tonight."

"If you will agree to go to the hospital wing with me, then I will do so," Albus promised.

Having little choice, Petunia's shoulders slumped, and she nodded. "Very well, but don't be surprised when I'm dead before morning comes."

"That won't happen. I promise you will be safe in the hospital wing," Albus said, taking her arm. "Come with me."

Before Albus left Petunia in the hospital wing, she had one final warning for him. "Be careful who you trust. Not everyone in this world is as they seem."

Albus hesitated. "If I didn't know better, I would say you were hinting at someone."

"If I said Severus Snape, you would think it was just the words of a bitter old woman trying to get back at him for stealing her sister," Petunia said. "But be warned, the Sirius Black of Voldemort's original world presented a face of a family man, a respected healer, when in reality he was a worse killer than Voldemort himself."

"He's already revealed himself to be that here," Albus reminded Petunia.

"I'm not just talking about the Sirius Black here," Petunia cautioned. "As I said, there may be others who you think are friends who are foe, and vice versa."

"Thank you for the warning," Albus said, and he then headed in to see Poppy to fill her in on the situation.

While Albus had been questioning Petunia, Severus had been doing the same to Dudley as he had taken him off to the Slytherin guest suite. "What are you doing here?"

"Mum said we have to move into the school. I don't know why though," Dudley said, before recalling what his mother had said about the man accompanying him. "If you're a teacher, then what do you teach?"

"Potions," Severus responded tersely.

Dudley didn't really know what potions entailed, so he asked. "Can you turn someone into a frog?"

Severus was used to the Muggle idea of witchcraft, and so he merely nodded. "Of course, but I wouldn't need a potion to do it."

Dudley didn't believe him. "Prove it."

Severus smirked and pulled out his wand, aiming it at Dudley. "I can do better than a frog. How about a dragon?"

"Cool!" Dudley exclaimed, when he suddenly realized that it was him who was about to become a dragon. "But..."

He didn't get any further as Severus incanted 'Mutatus Volucris' and where Dudley had once stood, there now stood a small and rotund light-skinned dragon.

Dudley looked down to find that he now had a claw rather than a hand, and, when he tried to say something, he shot sparks out of his nose.

Severus knew that the Headmaster would be unimpressed with his efforts, and so he changed Dudley back. "Is that proof enough?"

"That was sweet!" Dudley exclaimed, having thoroughly enjoyed the moment. "No wonder the freak, I mean, Potter, likes coming here."

"Indeed!" Severus continued walking. "You don't like your cousin?"

"He's alright, I guess," Dudley admitted.

"Yet you call him freak." Severus nodded to a member of his house, who stared with interest at Dudley as he passed by.

"That's because Mum said he is." Dudley didn't have much of an opinion of his own. "Because he can do magic."

Severus put Dudley on the spot. "So does that make me a freak?"

"No way." Dudley had been impressed by Severus' demonstration, even though it had been him it had been carried out upon. "Being able to turn me into a dragon was way cool."

"Is that so?" Severus asked drily, but didn't wait for an answer as they had reached their destination. "This is your room. The password is Snake Eyes."

"Snake eyes," Dudley repeated as a door opened.

"I'm sure someone will be along to see you later." Severus didn't stop to settle Dudley in, and he went hurrying further down the corridor to his rooms as he debated whether to leave to inform Tom of Petunia's arrival. Before he could decide, he was disturbed by a house elf saying that Albus wanted to see him.

As lunch began in the Great Hall, in Albus' office, four of the former members of the secret group that Albus had formed to fight against Voldemort, all met with him to discuss Petunia and her strange tale. Filius Flitwick, Remus, Minerva, and Severus all listened to Albus' recitation, Severus interrupting him before he could finish. "She's completely insane."

"I thought the same," Albus had to admit. "And tomorrow I will be arranging for Petunia to be moved to St. Mungo's. But I gave her my word that for tonight at least, I would keep her and her son safe in Hogwarts. She's currently in the hospital ward, and I would like Dudley to stay in the Slytherin guest suite."

"Of course," Severus said, although he was far from happy at the idea of babysitting the boy. "I'll ask one of the prefects to check in on him, and to take him to dinner."

"I would prefer he eat in the room," Albus instructed.

"I'll see to it." Severus rose to his feet. "If you'll excuse me."

Having come to the same conclusion as Severus and Albus, both Filius and Minerva also left, leaving just Remus behind. Albus looked at him. "You don't share our opinion?"

"I just keep wondering what happens if she is telling the truth." Remus said. "What if there is a threat?"

"I don't think she can be telling the truth, Remus. Petunia is simply a sick woman who needs help," Albus said softly. "But I would be remiss in my duties as head of the Wizengamot if I did not inform Amelia about the possible threat, even if I do not believe it to be one."

"I would like to know more about these supposed Pillars," Remus decided. "I'm well-versed in both Muggle and magical history, so I may have heard of them."

Albus looked down at the notes he had made. "The first one is actually called the Fountain of Youth. However, Petunia said it's a spell, and not a fountain like most Muggles believe."

"I know of it." Remus had come across it before. "But if memory serves, it has never worked."

"I said the same, and Petunia told me that it's because it has to be used in conjunction with the other three Pillars," Albus informed him before going on. "Now, the second Pillar is a power base known as the Validus Saxus."

Again Remus acknowledged he was aware of its existence. "I've heard of it but I thought it was just a legend."

Surprisingly Albus had not heard of it, and he therefore asked, "So what is it?"

"A very large and very powerful ruby," Remus recalled what he had read. "It's supposed to be located somewhere in the Myanmar region but if it is, I have no idea where."

"Interesting," Albus said and he looked back down at the list. "The third Pillar is known as the Clavis de Propylaeum – it's the key to the opening the Propylaeum, something we know as the death archway, to a specific destination but its form varies from world to world."

"And the fourth Pillar?" Remus asked, after deciding that it would be a waste of time to dwell on the third one.

Albus looked down for one final time. "Petunia said that if it exists here, the last Pillar should be easy to find. It's called the Cartouche de Multiplex Mundus – a set of stone cartouches that are basically a map to the worlds beyond the Propylaeum."

Remus searched his memories before shaking his head. "I've never heard of them, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist."

"True, but I'm still inclined to think that they exist only in Petunia's mind," Albus said.

"Would you mind if I questioned Petunia?" Remus asked.

"Be my guest," Albus said, aware that if anyone could tell if the woman was telling the truth, it would be Remus.

Remus therefore headed off to the hospital wing. Petunia was sitting on her bed, fully dressed, and reading a magazine when he walked in. "Mrs. Dursley?"

"Remus Lupin!" Petunia put down her magazine as she greeted Remus. "Did the Headmaster send you?"

Remus shook his head. "He told me about what you had told him, and I wanted to know more."

"You mean you've come to sniff out whether I'm telling the truth or not?" Petunia asked.

Remus wondered for a moment if she knew what he was, but seeing as Lily had been aware, he guessed it was likely. "Yes."

"So what would you like to know?" Petunia asked.

Remus thought for a moment. "You said that You-Know-Who moved to the world you knew him on from his original one. Didn't this new world already have a version of him?"

"Yes, but he was weak and had been overthrown by that world's version of Albus Dumbledore, and imprisoned in Azkaban." Petunia waited for Remus to ask about that world's version of the Headmaster.

He did not. Instead he asked again about Voldemort. "So what happened to that world's You-Know-Who?"

"Voldemort killed his weaker counterpart when he destroyed Azkaban." Petunia found herself enjoying the look of disbelief on Remus' face.

"That's impossible. Azkaban is indestructible," Remus answered.

"Didn't they say the same about the Titanic?" Petunia referred to the supposedly unsinkable ship that had sunk on its maiden voyage.

"Touché," Remus remarked dryly, before moving on. "Albus mentioned that You-Know-Who possessed two Deathly Hallows. I presume he was seeking the third. Did he find it?"

"No, he gave up the search, and for goodness sake, call him Voldemort. It's just a name," Petunia snapped.

Remus decided Petunia was right. "Okay, why did Voldemort give up his search?"

"Because, fool that I was, I told him about his supposed destiny to rule over all worlds, including the immortal one." Petunia gave Remus a wry smile. "I'm also the one who told him about the Four Pillars, thinking it would give me an edge on my sisters, but I was very wrong."

Remus mused this over for a few moments before asking. "So if you truly believe this to be true, and if you are as dissolute as you appear to be, then why did you go to Albus about this? Why didn't you try to negotiate with Black when he appeared at your home?"

"Because I was unaware of whom I was back then. When I became aware, I knew Dumbledore would take care of my son, and so I contacted him. And besides, even if I had known who I was when Black attacked me, he gave me precious little opportunity to talk," Petunia said pithily. She held out her teacup. "Would you mind?"

Remus tapped the cup, and Petunia sat back and started on her freshly warmed tea. "So, do you believe me?"

"I believe that you think you are telling the truth," Remus said.

"Would it help if I told you about your counterpart?" Petunia asked, stirring her tea.

Remus was curious as to what Petunia would make up about him, and so he said, "Please do."

Petunia gave a tiny smile, and began, revealing that she did indeed know Remus' secret. "You're not always a werewolf in every world but in the one in question you are. Your best friend was a woman named Mione Dominic; I believe you probably know her better here as Hermione Granger."

"I'm acquainted with Miss Granger," Remus said a little stiffly, not entirely sure where Petunia was going with this. "Go on."

"Mione ended up marrying your counterpart," Petunia said, before dropping a bombshell, "but only after she divorced Voldemort."

Remus shook his head in dismay and disbelief. "Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"What part?" Petunia asked casually.

"Any of it," Remus said in disgust. "None of it can be possible."

"Why not?" Petunia asked.

"Because there is no way any version of me would ever marry a woman who was once married to You-Know-Who!" Remus slipped back into his usual habit. "Not that such a marriage could ever have happened. There's no way You-Know-Who would have married someone like Hermione."

"But he did," Petunia said adamantly, and she went on at Remus' headshake. "What's wrong, Lupin? Don't you like the idea that a man like you would be happy settling for Voldemort's cast-off, or is it the fact that Voldemort managed to coax her into bed first that bothers you most?"

After Petunia's rather derogatory question, Remus decided he had heard enough, and angrily got to his feet. "Excuse me."

Remus returned to Albus' office to report what he had learnt. "I have to concur with Severus. She's not just a little unhinged; she's completely insane."

Albus could see that Petunia had upset Remus. "So don't let what she said get to you."

"But she's wasting our time," Remus complained, feeling a whole lot less charitable towards Petunia than he had earlier. "Making up stories about Hermione being married to Voldemort! And having the audacity to suggest that my counterpart would marry her after that is just beyond the pale."

Albus placed a hand on Remus' arm. "Calm down. We both know it isn't true."

Remus let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry but knowing Hermione as well as I do it really got my goat."

"I completely understand," Albus said, moving back around his desk. "But this will be the last time you will have to deal with her. I've just spoken to Healer Dunbar, and he will be moving her to St. Mungo's in the morning."

"But why not move her now?" Remus asked, seeing no point in prevaricating.

"Because as I said earlier, I have promised to take care of both her and Dudley, at least for tonight," Albus said.

"What will happen to the boy tomorrow?" Remus enquired.

"I'm going to contact the wizarding children's court," Albus told him. "As Dudley is a squib, I can arrange for him to be taken in by a magical family, at least as a temporary measure."

Remus sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. "When Harry told me more about his upbringing, I always thought Dudley sounded like a nightmare. But now, given how Petunia has turned out, I think some of the blame rests soundly on her shoulders."

"I would agree," Albus said, before getting to his feet. "Now, I think you should get some lunch."

"I'm not hungry," Remus said. "Please excuse me." And he then left the room, heading to prepare for his afternoon class.

Looking down at his notepad, Albus decided it was time to go and see Amelia, and overriding the wards on his fireplace, he flooed off to the Ministry.

Laurifer Manor

Almost as soon as he left Albus' office, Severus had arranged for Dudley's food to be delivered to his room, and he had then left the school, heading off to see Tom.

Tom was surprised to see Severus on a school day. "What brings you here?"

Severus filled Tom in on what Albus had revealed about Petunia, and her claims. He could not, however, tell Tom that much about the Pillars since he had left before Albus' full explanation. "I believe the woman to be mad but I thought you should know anyway."

Tom contemplated what Severus had just told him. "I've heard of such theories that alternate worlds exist but I always believed it to be impossible."

"As did I," Severus said. "But, even though I truly believe it to be unfeasible, if what she's saying is true, then there is something out there which would make you extremely powerful."

"And immortal," Tom added. However, like everyone else who had heard Petunia's tale, Tom was also rather disbelieving. "But it all seems to be good to be true. So for the moment I think searching for some objects we don't even believe exists will be a complete waste of our time. We will therefore continue the search for the final Deathly Hallow."

Severus was aware that Tom had the ring, having had it in his possession together with the diary. "Although I have been unable to locate the cloak, at least we know that Dumbledore has the Elder Wand."

"And I'm going to enjoy taking it from him," Tom said, smiling as he thought about it. He then moved on. "In the meantime, I think we should capitalize on the Dursley woman's expectations. You say she is in the hospital wing?"

"Albus is moving her to St. Mungo's tomorrow," Severus informed him. "What do you intend to do?"

"I think it's time Black took another outing," Tom said. "And finishes what he started."

"It's unlikely he'll get back out, if he can even get in," Severus warned Tom. "The hospital wing is always warded in case help is required, and Albus will know immediately that something has happened."

"That will be Black's problem," Tom said. "What security is in place around the school?"

"There are currently between four and six Aurors on guard at all times, and wards are in existence around the school, which require a password to pass through them," Severus told him. "Due to my oath as a teacher, I cannot give you the password, so Black will have to figure it out for himself."

"That won't be a problem," Tom decided. "Anything else?"

Severus nodded. "At night there are usually two Dementors patrolling inside the grounds. They are withdrawn though during the day, because they went after Potter."

"A pity they didn't get him," Tom remarked. "And the school entrance?"

"Locked after dark, and so Black may have to wait until daybreak to make his attack," Severus said.

"I'll work something out," Tom said. "Is there anything else?"

"No," Severus shook his head, and after looking at the time, he apologized. "I'm sorry, but I need to return. I have a class due to start in fifteen minutes."

"Then go," Tom dismissed Severus, and sat down to figure things out.

Later that evening - Hospital Wing

Harry headed in, holding his arm. "Madam Pomfrey?"

Poppy came strutting out. "What have you done now?"

Samantha, who had accompanied Harry, explained. "He was showing me how to perform a Wronski Feint, and he got in the way of the beaters' practicing for the game tomorrow. The bludger glanced off his arm."

Harry grimaced as Poppy waved her wand over his arm. "Is it broken?"

"No, for a change," Poppy told him. "I'll give you something for the pain, and some salve for the bruising."

Harry sank down onto an empty bed, not really paying any attention to the curtained-off bed behind him. After Poppy had given him a vial of painkiller, she headed off, and Harry pulled a face as he swallowed the contents. "That tastes disgusting."

Samantha smiled. "I think Professor Snape does it on purpose. Our painkillers at home taste like fruit."

"I'll have to start making my own," Harry said, climbing to his feet.

Suddenly a woman's voice called out, "Harry?"

Samantha felt Harry tense up. "What's wrong?"

"She shouldn't be here," Harry said quietly, and then he headed towards the curtained-off area. Stepping around it, he found his Aunt sitting on the bed. "Aunt Petunia, what are you doing here?"

"Hello, Harry," Petunia said, not answering Harry's question. "It's been a while."

"Yeah," Harry responded. He put his uninjured arm around Samantha when she came to join him, and not wanting to expose Samantha to Petunia, he started to turn away. "I have to be going."

"Is this your girlfriend?" Petunia asked, preventing Harry from leaving.

"Yes," Harry said, and he resignedly introduced her to his aunt. "Sammie, this is my aunt, Petunia Dursley."

"Hello," Samantha said a little nervously, feeling the tension in the room.

Petunia looked at the girl. "Sammie, would you excuse us? I have something I wish to talk to my nephew about."

Samantha looked askance at Harry, and he nodded. "I'll see you in the library." He dropped a quick kiss on her cheek, waiting until she had left before facing his aunt. "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

Next Chapter: Petunia reveals a secret about Lily; Harry is rude to Severus; Tom takes Sirius on an outing; Neville is presented with an opportune moment.

Chapter 47: Taking A Stand

Petunia reached into her pocket and extracted a pouch. "This is for you."

Harry tentatively took the small velvet bag. "What is it?"

"Open it up and see, boy," Petunia snapped. Even now, she still couldn't bring herself to be nice to Harry.

Harry wished he could use the Riddikulus charm on this version of his Aunt as he had done in Defense, but as he couldn't, he instead opened the bag and took out a pair of rings. "Rings?"

Petunia nodded. "They belonged to your grandmother."

Harry's head shot up in surprise. "Why are you giving them to me, and not Dudley?"

"Because they were never meant for Dudley." Petunia had always disliked the rings herself. "They were left to Lily, and since she had no daughters, then they should go to you, for your wife, or your children when you have them."

"Why didn't they go into the Potter vault?" Harry ran a finger lightly over the heavy and old-fashioned rings that were inset with amber and topaz. He thought the rings were beautiful, and he was completely stunned that Petunia had passed them on.

Petunia could see that she had blindsided Harry. "Lily never wore them – they were too big for her – and she therefore placed them in our parents' safety-deposit box, and she never took them out before she died."

"I don't know what to say." Harry had never known his Aunt be so kind to him before.

"I think thank you is what etiquette dictates," Petunia responded.

"Thank you," Harry automatically said, before shaking his head. "I still don't understand why you are giving these to me." He finally decided that it was time to face his fears, and he met his Aunt's eyes. "I know you don't like me."

"I don't." Petunia was a little surprised that Harry finally seemed to have gained some courage from somewhere. She had only seen him stand up for himself on a few occasions, and so generally up until then, she would have called him a coward through and through. "But I don't have long left to live, and I thought I should wrap up a few loose ends before I die."

Harry immediately thought she was talking about the threat from Sirius. "You'll be safe from Black here."

"I'm not entirely sure it's your godfather who's after me," Petunia answered. It took a few moments for her to realize that Harry didn't seem surprised by her revelation about Sirius. "You knew he was your godfather?"

"Remus told me," Harry said, taking pleasure that he had obviously surprised his Aunt. "How did you know?"

"Lily wrote to me one final time to try and reconcile after you and Jamie were born," Petunia started, only for Harry to stop her.

"You knew about Jamie, and yet you never told me. Why?" Harry demanded to know.

"I hated your father and the wizarding world for taking my sister away from me," Petunia answered honestly. "I only took you in for the money, and I didn't care that you had no idea you had had a twin brother."

Harry scowled at his aunt. "But I deserved to know."

"What good would it have done if I had told you?" Petunia asked in a bored voice.

"I would have at least known that I once had a brother," Harry snapped.

"And I'd have had to put up with your weeping and wailing," Petunia said, her voice full of contempt.

Harry shook his head, and his voice was full of anger as he addressed Petunia. "You're disgusting." He turned away. "I'm going."

Petunia grabbed Harry's uninjured arm to stop him leaving. "Before you go, there are a few more things I need to say."

"Such as?" Harry was rather aggressive in his tone but he didn't care; he had decided that he was no longer afraid of his Aunt.

Petunia decided she preferred this Harry to the wimpy one she was used to. "Such as a warning." She could see that she now had Harry's attention. "Be careful of Severus Snape. Dumbledore obviously trusts him but I do not."

Harry had to agree but he still wanted to know why his Aunt had suddenly told him. "Why not?"

"Because he took Lily away from me," Petunia said softly. She had not been entirely truthful when she had told Albus that Dudley was the only person she cared for; she had once felt the same way about her sister. "I used to spy on them when they practiced magic when they thought no-one was watching."

"You can't do magic out of school," Harry pointed out the flaw in Petunia's comment.

"You can if you don't have a tracking spell on your wand." Petunia could see that Harry knew what she was talking about. "And even though I didn't know it then, I know now that some of the spells Snape showed Lily were Dark Magic; magic far too dark for a child of his age."

Harry gave a small shiver, and almost reluctantly confided in his Aunt. "I've never liked him."

"Then you are definitely cleverer than Lily in that respect," Petunia said in a bitter voice.

It was only then that Harry realized that he'd missed something, and it was something that might explain why Severus had helped Lily when she had been attacked by Voldemort. "Mum and Snape were friends?"

"They were more than that, Harry," Petunia knew she was going to hurt Harry with her next words but frankly she didn't care. "They were lovers."

Harry immediately denied it could be possible. "I don't believe you."

"I found them together in her bedroom." Petunia could still remember with clarity the horror she had experienced when she had come home early from Vernon's after an argument and found Lily and Severus in bed together, the day before Lily was due to return to Hogwarts after the Christmas break.

"They could have just been studying," Harry suggested, not wanting to believe what he was hearing.

"If studying includes being naked and having sex, then they were studying," Petunia responded, sarcasm dripping from every word.

Harry took several deep breaths before he trusted himself to speak again. "Does Remus know about this?"

"Lupin knows they were friends," Petunia revealed. "But I doubt he knows as much as I do."

"How do you know so much?" Harry asked, gathering that Petunia knew more than she had so far told him.

"Lily thought I was going to tell our parents she was sleeping with Snape, and I was." Petunia gave a small smile. "So I blackmailed her into telling me what was going on in exchange for my silence."

Harry shook his head. "I still don't believe you. Mum would never have slept with Snape. She loved my Dad."

"She didn't start dating Potter until she was a seventh year. When I found Lily with Snape it was Christmas of her sixth year," Petunia said.

Harry refused to believe Petunia. "I don't know why you're doing this, but I know you're lying."

Petunia ignored Harry's words, and started speaking again. "Lily told me that every changed with a date to an Easter Ball. She said..."

And so Petunia began to tell Harry exactly what Lily had told her, and Harry found himself unable to leave. He did not want to listen to his Aunt's lies but at the same time he felt compelled to stay. He therefore listened in silence to Petunia's lengthy and quite comprehensive tale. Only once she had finished, did he finally break free from the spell that Petunia seemed to have woven around him. And he didn't hesitate to show his disgust. "You never really cared about my Mum. If you had you never would have lied to me about her like this."

"You just complained that I should have told you the truth about your family," Petunia pointed out. "And now I have."

"None of its true," Harry snapped.

"Ask Snape," Petunia said, challenging Harry. "See how he reacts."

"I will," Harry growled, and turning around, he headed for the door.

Having bumped into Ginny on his return from Laurifer Manor, Severus was walking towards the potions room, with Ginny at his side, when Harry stormed into his path. Severus immediately knew that something was wrong. He had never seen Harry look at him so angrily before. "You have something to say, Potter?"

Harry stood up to his second nemesis that day. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Severus countered.

"That you went to a Ball with my Mum, and then began shagging her?" Harry asked crudely, his anger driving him on.

"That is none of your business, Potter," Severus snarled, fuming at Harry's choice of words. "Fifty points from Hufflepuff for your insolence."

Intent on grabbing a sandwich from the Great Hall before he held detention, Remus had been trailing Harry, although unintentionally, and he therefore intervened. "What's going on?"

Harry turned on Remus. "Did you know he was shagging my Mum?"

Stunned by Harry's uncharacteristic outburst, Remus glanced at Severus before returning his attention to Harry. "I think this is a conversation that should take place somewhere a little more private than here."

Severus glanced over at Ginny. "Go to the potions room, and begin the potion we've just discussed."

All agog, Ginny headed off towards the classroom, and Harry, Remus, and Severus headed in the opposite direction. Severus quickly realized that they were heading for the Defense classroom.

Once inside, Remus shut the door, and sat Harry down. "Now, Harry, I want to know who told you that Lily had slept with Professor Snape."

Harry met Severus' gaze head on, and firmly stated, "My Aunt."

Severus snorted. "Petunia never liked me, and she obviously doesn't like you any better, Potter. I can't believe you would take her word as gospel."

"Is it true?" Harry still persevered.

Remus shook his head, and spoke before Severus could. "No, Harry. It isn't. Professor Snape was friends with your mother but nothing more than that."

"So Aunt Petunia was lying?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid so," Remus said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Your Aunt thinks she's received some bad news today, and I'm afraid that she's hitting out in retaliation."

"You mean that she's going to die?" Harry asked, making it clear that he already knew.

"Yes, and she's obviously told you to garner some sympathy," Severus butted in. "And in the hope of getting you into trouble. And needless to say, you performed splendidly, Potter."

Remus had to agree with Severus' assessment, and he therefore made a demand of Harry. "Harry, how you have behaved towards Professor Snape is unacceptable, and I therefore want you to apologize to him."

Harry gritted his teeth, and without an ounce of true feeling, he made the necessary apology. "I apologize for insulting you, Sir."

Aware that Harry did not mean it, Severus wanted to tell Harry where to stick his apology, but he refrained from doing so, and in a voice that was full of disdain, he said, "Apology accepted, Potter. Now get out of my sight."

"Harry, stay," Remus countermanded Severus' order. "I want to talk to you."

Severus gave Remus a look that was hate filled and he marched out of the classroom, his black robe flying out behind him. Harry watched him go before turning back to Remus. "He doesn't like you, does he?"

"No, he doesn't," Remus said. "Black once played a terrible trick on him, and led him to where I was transforming. If James hadn't stepped in, I could have killed Severus."

Harry's eyes widened. "He knows about you?"

"Professor Dumbledore swore him to secrecy," Remus immediately reassured Harry with his words. "But that isn't the issue here. You are. I know you're upset about what your Aunt said, but you shouldn't have taken her word as the truth. You should have come to me first before facing off against Severus."

"Why?" Harry asked. "Aunt Petunia probably knows more about Mum than anyone, even you."

"That maybe so," Remus had to agree with Harry's assessment. "But I'm afraid your aunt is going to be moved to St. Mungo's tomorrow. She's having some psychological problems right now, and she's been saying things that aren't true, including things about me and Hermione."

Harry was stunned to hear this, and he immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. "You mean she's been saying that you and Hermione have had sex?"

Remus could see no reason to hide what had transpired from Harry, and so he told him the truth. "Not exactly. Petunia tried to tell Professor Dumbledore that she was an immortal being from another world. And that apparently in this world I was married to Hermione. But that it only happened after she divorced You-Know-Who."

Harry could hardly believe it. "No wonder she's going to St. Mungo's." He shook his head. "But she seemed so sincere, and everything she said was so detailed."

"Tell me what she said," Remus instructed, deciding to find out exactly what lies Petunia had pumped out now.

And so Harry began to tell Remus what Petunia had told him about the Easter Ball.

As he spoke, neither Harry nor Remus realized that Harry's words had had quite an impact on Severus. And that Harry's accusation had led Severus to recall the same incident that Harry was currently relaying to Remus, only Severus' memory went further back than the actual night of the Ball...

February 1976

"Hey, Evans," Potter's voice interrupted Lily's study.

Lily scowled at him. "What?"

"Want to go to the Easter Ball with someone brilliant?" James leaned nonchalantly against the nearest bookshelf.

"Yes," Lily responded.

Severus' heart sank. He had been hoping that Lily would go with him, but he had so far failed to pluck up the courage to ask her, and now it seemed as though he had left it far too late.

James Potter straightened up, a delighted look on his face. "I knew you'd cave eventually, and say yes."

"In your dreams, Potter!" Lily gave a self-satisfied smile. "I'm going with Sev."

Taking in what Lily had just said, Severus felt like jumping up and down with joy. But there was no way he was going to do that in front of James Potter. Instead, he casually glanced over at the disappointed Gryffindor. "Sorry, Potter. You should have asked sooner."

James Potter gave Severus a look of pure hatred, and then he stalked out of the library. Severus then raised a questioning eyebrow at Lily. "So you're going to the Ball with me?"

Lily became a little shamefaced. "Sorry to put you on the spot, Sev. But you know how much he gets on my nerves."

"And I know how much he hates me," Severus finished off saying what Lily had failed to say. "And if we go to the Ball together, he'll hate me even more."

"Look, Sev. You don't have to go with me if you don't want to." Lily didn't want Severus to feel pressured. "I know you've probably already asked someone else."

"I haven't." Severus gave Lily one of the rare smiles he kept only for her. "And I would like to go with you."

"Then it's a date then." Lily smiled back at Severus before continuing with her potions homework.

Severus' concentration was immediately shot. Lily had said the word 'date'. He did not dare pick up his quill now; his hands were trembling too much.

Lily noticed that Severus had stopped working. "What are you dreaming about now? Another potion?"

"Nothing," Severus said, and he stood up, needing to put some distance between himself and Lily. "I'll be back in a short while."

"No problem." Lily continued working on her essay, totally oblivious to Severus' dilemma.

It was to be the same at the Ball. The first moment he saw Lily in a set of dark gold robes, Severus' mouth went dry with nervous tension.

And unlike the time in the library, he was unable to hide it from Lily, and he realized that Lily had spotted his shaking hands when she remarked, "Sev, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were nervous."

"I am nervous," Severus admitted in a low voice so that it wouldn't carry.

Lily pulled him to one side. "Why?"

"I know it's ridiculous but this seems so very different." Severus tried to find the right words. "And you look so perfect." He hadn't meant to say it but the words just slipped out.

Before he could do anything, Lily's face bloomed into a becoming pink. "Sev, thank you. And you look really smart yourself."

Severus had been thankful that he had saved up most of his summer potion making earnings from the previous year, and had splurged on the smart black evening wear. "I didn't want to embarrass you."

Lily pulled Severus even further away from everyone else. "Sev, you could never embarrass me."

"I don't have the kind of money that Potter has, and..." Severus didn't get any further, Lily placing a finger over his lips.

"Sev, Potter is a show-off, and I'd rather have you in the worst clothes imaginable than have him dressed up in the best," Lily staunchly defended her friend.

Severus was horrified to realize that his eyes were filling with tears at Lily's words, and he had to quickly look down to hide them. "Thanks."

Lily waited until Severus looked back at her again to speak. "Sev, you are my best friend. Don't you remember what we said?"

"Best friends forever?" Severus asked.

"Forever!" Lily responded vehemently. "Now let's go inside."

After spending several - what Severus could only describe as magical - hours with Lily, Severus excused himself and headed into the garden to get some fresh air. Making his way to a screened arbor at the back of the garden, he sank down onto a bench. He didn't believe that life could get any better at that moment. But he was wrong. After ten minutes Lily's voice interrupted him. "Sev, where are you?"

"Over here," Severus called out. "Behind the roses."

Lily made her way over to him. "I thought you'd deserted me. Potter wouldn't leave me alone; kept asking me to dance with him."

Severus' face darkened. "Did you dance with him?"

"He's a pig," Lily responded. "Of course I didn't." Lily gave a little giggle. "Are you jealous, Sev?"

"Yes!" The word slipped out before Severus could stop it.

"Oh!" Lily was surprised by Severus' response. "You don't have to be. I'll never be interested in him."

Severus couldn't let it rest despite Lily's words. "I've seen the way he looks at you."

"Have you seen the way I look at him?" Lily asked in a prim voice.

Severus met Lily's eyes and the two of them burst out laughing. "Sorry, I'm being ridiculous."

"Yes, you are." Lily leant forward to kiss Severus. "You are, and always will be, my friend, Sev and don't forget it."

Severus' eyes widened when Lily's kiss didn't land on his cheek as normal; this time she kissed his lips in a gentle but firm way. He was

filled with regret with Lily pulled away, and he knew then what he wanted to do more than anything else in the whole world. Gathering up his courage, he met Lily's eyes again. "Lily, may I kiss you?"

Lily gave a playful little smile. "I thought you just did."

"You kissed me." Severus' voice was trembling. "May I?"

Lily nodded slowly, and then she closed her eyes, giving Severus permission. Severus slipped a shaking hand into Lily's hair, and he lowered his head until his mouth covered hers. Severus had never kissed anyone before, although he knew Lily had. And he therefore let her take the lead when she opened her mouth beneath his, and gently began to massage his lips with her own.

Severus knew the mechanics of kissing, but even so, he was a little surprised when he felt Lily's tongue slide into his mouth. Copying Lily's actions, Severus began to return the kiss, his grip tightening as his heart began to pump faster, and his body started to react to Lily's closeness and the kiss. For him, it felt as though the kiss went on forever, and he was gasping for breath when it ended.

Lily too looked a little stunned, and was completely out of breath. "Sev, that was some kiss."

"I'm sorry," Severus apologized.

"I'm not." Lily gave a giggle, and asked in a conspiratorial voice, "I thought you hadn't been seeing anyone. Who was she?"

"I haven't been seeing anyone," Severus protested.

"You kiss me like that and tell me that you haven't been seeing anyone!" Lily snorted. "Tell me who she is."

"Really," Severus' voice was soft and compelling, "there's no-one but you."

Lily's playful demeanor vanished. "That was your first kiss?"

Severus nodded, his cheeks red from embarrassment. "Yes."

"Oh!" Lily was seemingly lost for words. After a few minutes silence, she got to her feet. "Perhaps we'd better go back inside."

But before they could leave, Severus spotted James Potter, and his most hated adversary, Sirius Black, heading their way. "Just great!"

James sauntered up to them. "What are you doing out here with him, Evans?"

"Kissing him, what else?" Lily grabbed Severus' hand and began to pull them away from the duo.

Severus dutifully followed, his heart soaring at Lily's response. But he had not missed the momentary look of raw pain that had crossed James Potter's face. He had the feeling that the Gryffindor was really in love with Lily, just as he, Severus was.

Severus spent the next few days thinking about the kiss and debating whether to ask Lily to be his girlfriend. Any intentions were soon lost when Lily, with a regretful and worried look on her face, sat down next to him in the library. "Sev, can I speak to you about the other night?"

Severus knew then that his dreams were about to shattered. "Of course."

"I shouldn't have kissed you." Lily's voice was tear-laden. "And I think it's best if we just forget about it."

Sorely disappointed, Severus fought not to cry as well. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to ruin our friendship, Sev," Lily wouldn't meet Severus' eyes as she responded. "You really are my best friend, and I'm afraid of what will happen if we take things further and then it doesn't work out. I don't want to lose you."

Severus knew there was more to it than that; Lily's face was red, and she still had not looked at him. "Lily, please tell me what's happened."

"Nothing, I just..." Lily's voice trailed off, tears clogging her voice.

"What's wrong?" Severus took Lily's hand, trying to comfort her.

"I know what's happening to you because of me," Lily blurted out, and she then began to sob.

Severus led her to the back of the library, holding her until she had finished crying. When she finally had calmed down enough to respond, Lily revealed what she had found out. "I overheard Bole saying that you'd been dealt with for taking me to the Ball."

Severus had hoped to hide it from Lily. "It wasn't that bad."

"Sev, I'm not going to let you get hurt again because of me," Lily said, her voice full of determination.

"It's too late to change anything now," Severus said.

Lily disagreed. "Everything was alright up until the Ball, so I think it's best if we just go back to the way things were before then."

Severus tried to make light of the situation, but instead he only made it worse. "Lily, I've been putting up with that crap ever since I started here."

Lily's face filled with horror. "Because of me?"

Severus nodded. "Yes."

"Then we can't be seen together," Lily decided.

"No-one's just going to believe that we're not together, not after the other night," Severus protested, more than a little annoyed at himself for revealing the truth.

Lily was not going to back down, and she defiantly said, "Then we'll find a way to make them believe."

Present Time

In Remus' office, Harry stopped for breath. While he had no idea how Severus had felt about his mother, he wanted to know if what Petunia had told him about Lily hating James was true. "Was Aunt Petunia telling the truth? Did Mum really hate Dad?"

Remus gave a wry smile. "Yes. Lily did hate James up until their seventh year when they began to work together as Head Boy and Head Girl."

"And the ball?" Harry asked. "Did Mum really go with Snape and kiss him, like Aunt Petunia said?"

"Yes," Remus confirmed. "But I didn't see the kiss firsthand."

"And what about what my Aunt said about Snape being bullied?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know if that was true, but Slytherin had a reputation for it, so it could be true."

"And Mum really went out with Snape after the Ball?" Harry asked, his disgust evident in his voice.

"Yes, but they split up about two months' later," Remus said, after thinking about it for a moment.

"Do you know why?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Remus said, and then he launched into an explanation. "We'd just finished our exams, and James decided to pick on Severus. Lily ended up defending Severus."

Harry caught the grimace Remus gave. "You didn't like her defending him?"

"She was right to do so," Remus said, surprising Harry. "And it was something I should have done."

"Why would you defend a Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Because I was a prefect, and instead of stepping in and breaking things up, I let James do what he wanted because he was my friend," Remus admitted, his voice full of embarrassment. "It's why Lily had to step up and do what I should have done. And it's also why she and Severus broke up."

"He didn't like Mum defending him?" Harry guessed.

"I think he was embarrassed by it, and so he called her a 'Mudblood' and rejected her help. Lily was almost as rude back, and stormed off. As far as I'm aware, they never spoke again after that." Remus, like Petunia, had not known that the argument had created a fortuitous occasion for Lily and Severus to publicly end their friendship, and yet still remain friends. It had only been pure bad luck that Petunia had discovered that their friendship had been far from over.

Completely unaware of any of this, Harry brought up a sticking point. "Amelia said Snape helped Mum when she was attacked by Voldemort."

"She was unconscious and only found out about Severus' help afterwards," Remus said. "So, as I've just said, the last time they spoke was in fifth year."

As Remus again confirmed his belief, Harry recalled what Petunia had said about Lily and Severus. "That means my Aunt lied about my Mum and Snape. There's no way Mum would have spoken to him again after he was that rude to her, let alone slept with him in sixth year."

"Which is why I made you apologize to Severus," Remus said. "Now, I'm going to award thirty of the points back that Severus took from you, but only because you were understandably upset."

"Only thirty?" Harry asked in dismay.

"You were still extremely rude, Harry," Remus reminded him.

Harry wanted to complain but Remus had been right. Harry had been horribly rude, and now it seemed without good reason. "I suppose."

"There's no suppose about it," Remus said firmly, but he was smiling to lessen the impact of the severity of his tone. "Now unless there is anything else you want to talk to me about, I suggest you get along, and go get changed."

Even though he had had to accept his punishment, Harry was still far from happy about it. Muttering uncomplimentary things about Snape under his breath, he went off stomping down the corridor,

heading back to the Hufflepuff changing rooms so that he could take a shower and get changed. And with his mind on other things, Harry was not really looking at where he was walking, and he therefore failed to spot a pool of water on the floor that one of the students had walked in from outside. He noticed though when his feet went from under him, and with a startled cry he hurtled towards the floor, his head sharply striking the stone steps he had been about to walk down.

Coming from the opposite direction that Harry had been going in, Neville Longbottom too had things on his mind. That morning, he had received a letter from Bellatrix Lestrange with a very thinly veiled warning in it. And so now Neville was faced with the reality that he was somehow going to have to attack Harry or Dumbledore, and take their blood by force.

Neville had dismissed the idea of attacking Dumbledore immediately. But even with just Harry as his intended target, Neville was almost in tears of panic as he thought about what he was going to have to do. He knew that Harry was a far better dueler than him, having attended the dueling class that Remus now ran. In fact, Harry was better than any of his year mates, and this knowledge sent Neville into another frenzied panic attack, forcing him to stop to take several deep breaths as he tried to calm himself down. "I can do this. I have to do this."

Neville gave a frightened sob. "I can't do it. I can't do it."

Neville stood in the corridor for a few long moments, before he remembered that he was already running late for a detention with Remus, which Severus had issued after Neville had blown up yet another cauldron. He therefore began to run, only to come to a halt as he rounded the corner and spotted someone lying in a pool of blood.

Neville hurried over, and dropping his bag beside him, he rolled the person over. "Harry!"

Harry didn't stir, and Neville quickly identified that the blood was coming from a large cut on Harry's head. About to run to get help, Neville hesitated as he glanced down at the miniature river of blood that was dripping down the first step, the same blood that was currently coating his hands. Lifting his hands to his face Neville

stared at them as if he had never seen them before, and softly murmured, "Harry's blood."

And it was Harry's blood that Neville needed, but even given an opportunity like this, he still wondered if he dared do it. Then he remembered about the implied warning, and decided he had no choice. His hands shaking, Neville flipped open his bag, rummaging through it until he found one of the vials he always carried in case he found a good plant sample. His heart pounding in his ears, he placed the vial beneath the blood that was running down the step, and filled it to the top.

Neville jumped when Harry let out a groan, and he almost spilled the vial as he tried to place the top on it. But after some fumbling, it was finally on, and he shoved the vial into the very bottom of his bag. Harry groaned again, and Neville spoke softly to him. "I'm going to get help."

Then, after climbing to his feet, Neville set off running in the direction of Remus' office.

Potions Classroom

Ginny put down her wand when Severus came in wearing a look she had never seen before. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Severus responded in a distracted voice, his mind still on Lily Potter. "I suppose you want to know if what Potter said was true."

"It's none of my business," Ginny immediately said, although she was itching to know the truth.

Draco, who had also joined Ginny to complete a potion Severus had set for him, looked at his godfather. "What did Potter say?"

"He accused Severus of sleeping with his mother," Ginny filled Draco in when Severus failed to reply. She knew Draco would find out eventually if she did not, since there had been plenty of other students in the vicinity when Harry had launched into his tirade.

Draco laughed. "As if Uncle Severus would touch a Mudblood Gryffindor like Potter's mum. She was probably..."

Severus snapped out of his stupor and swung around, interrupting Draco, his words full of anger. "Do not ever talk about Lily like that again!"

Both Draco and Ginny's eyes widened at Severus' reaction, Ginny daring to ask, "So it's true?"

"It's true that I was her friend," Severus admitted, having given himself away, and also aware that Lucius knew the truth about him and Lily, and that he would tell Draco if he asked.

Draco couldn't resist asking about Severus' other activities with Lily. "And did you really...?"

Severus scowled. "That is none of your business. Now get on with your potions." He then headed to his desk to begin marking homework.

He had almost finished when he became aware that Ginny was saying his name. "Do you require something?"

"Yes," Ginny said as she put a suspension spell over her potion. "If you were friends with Lily Potter, why did you become a Death Eater? Everyone knows she fought for the Light."

Severus put down his quill, and rather acerbically announced, "Because it was the right thing to do."

"But why didn't Lily stop you?" Ginny asked. "She was your friend."

"I don't see your friends lining up to stop you," Severus countered.

"They don't know," Ginny reminded him. "Did Lily?"

Severus scowled. "Yes, and she ended our friendship because of it."

Ginny decided she quite liked Harry's mum. "And she started dating Harry's dad after that?"

"Obviously," Severus' voice was full of condescension. "Not that their story had a happy ending."

Draco looked smugly at his godfather. "Yeah, Uncle..." He trailed off, realizing what he had been about to reveal.

Severus indicated that Draco should go on. "You can speak freely, Draco."

So Draco finished off his sentence. "Uncle Severus killed James Potter."

Ginny was utterly shocked. "You killed him? But I thought the Dark Lord did it."

"The Dark Lord had intended to kill Potter himself. But aware of my dislike for Potter, he gave him to me." Severus' words were not entirely true. Severus' hatred of James Potter had grown upon learning about Lily's pregnancy, and Severus had gone as far as begging Voldemort to be allowed to be the one to kill James, as well as asking that Lily be spared.

"But James Potter was an Auror," Ginny protested, still stunned to learn that Voldemort had not killed James as was widely believed.

"He was, but he was also no match for me," Severus said in a voice that held no pride, merely stating the facts.

"Then what happened?" Ginny asked, wondering what else might be different from what she knew.

Severus had no problem in telling Ginny. "The Dark Lord had ordered me to stay below with Wormtail, and..."

"Wormtail?" Ginny interrupted.

"The man who betrayed Lily's whereabouts to the Dark Lord," Severus said in an icy voice.

"What happened to him?" Ginny asked. "Did he die when the house was destroyed?"

"No," Severus responded. "Sirius Black tried to kill him after the event."

"Why?" Ginny asked in confusion. "They were on the same side."

"That's what everyone believes," Draco interrupted, his voice full of glee.

Ginny quickly latched onto what Draco was suggesting. "Black isn't a Death Eater?"

"No," Severus admitted.

Now Ginny began to consider what she knew. "But if Black isn't a Death Eater, then why did he kill Harry's Uncle?"

Draco knew from his father what had happened, and so he baited Ginny. "Come on, Weasel, think about it."

Severus scowled at Draco. "If you call Ginny 'Weasel' again, Draco, I will let her use you for Cruciatus practice." Draco subsided and Severus turned to Ginny. "Black had no choice in the matter. I found him after his escape from Azkaban, and after a little reunion I handed him over to Tom."

Ginny jumped to the wrong conclusion. "So Tom used polyjuice to impersonate Black and kill Harry's uncle?"

"Wrong!" Draco jumped in, although he omitted calling Ginny 'Weasel' this time. "It was Black who did it."

Ginny began to put the pieces together. "Tom used the Imperius curse on him, didn't he?"

"No, Black was given Imperius potion," Severus said.

Realization dawned, the Imperius potion being one that Severus had already begun to teach to Ginny. "He couldn't fight it."

"No, and he still can't, which is rather convenient," Severus remarked.

Now Ginny was confused again. "I don't understand."

"Black is coming here tonight," Severus informed her.

"Harry!" Ginny breathed in alarm.

"He's not after Potter," Severus told her, although after Harry's performance earlier, Severus wished that Sirius was.

Ginny had heard about Harry's aunt being in the hospital wing, and she correctly deduced what was going to happen. "He's coming after Harry's aunt, isn't he?"

"Five points to Hufflepuff," Severus said sarcastically.

Ginny thought about Harry and how this would affect him, and she decided she had to take a stand. "I'm sorry, but I can't let an innocent woman die."

"The door is there." Severus pointed at it, aware that Ginny would do nothing. "Go and try to help her if you want, but the moment you try and tell someone, you will die."

Ginny shook her head. "But I can't just stand by and let it happen."

"Then you're welcome to try and stop Black if you wish," Severus offered. "But be warned, if you run across him, he's a far better dueler than even I am. And he will kill you, or anyone else that tries to stop him."

For Severus to admit to Sirius' prowess was quite something, and Ginny knew that he had to be telling the truth. She therefore slumped back down onto her seat. "It isn't fair."

"Life never is," Severus said sarcastically, before getting up and leaving the potions room. He had no fears that Ginny would do anything to help; he knew that she valued her own life and those of her family too highly to do so.

"Boo hoo, Weasel," Draco taunted Ginny now that Severus had left. "Potter's auntie is going to die, and you can't do anything about it."

"I could blow a hole through you," Ginny snarled.

Aware that Ginny was decidedly the better dueler, Draco chose discretion over valor, and followed in Severus' footsteps, leaving Ginny alone to consider what was going to happen. Severus was right; she could do nothing to help Petunia, and in her frustration she angrily blasted Draco's cauldron across the room, before stalking out.

Laurifer Manor

It was not long before dawn when Sirius was woken up by Tom. "What do you want now?"

"You're going on another field trip," Tom said. "Get up."

The Imperius potion being a permanent thing, Sirius had little choice but to do as he was told. "Where are we going?"

"To Hogwarts," Tom responded. "You're going to finish what you started with the Dursley woman. She believes she's destined to die, and you're going to fulfill that destiny."

"I cannot get into Hogwarts," Sirius said, pulling on a sweater. "If Albus has someone he wants to protect there, there will be wards in place."

Tom agreed. "There are not only wards, but also Aurors, and Dementors."

Sirius paled. "Dementors?"

"You managed to get past them once, and you will do so again," Tom said. "When we arrive, you will kill all the Aurors you come into contact with, except for one. You will use him or her to get you through the wards and into the grounds. Then you will stun them. Do not kill them, or you may set off the wards."

"What happens if they kill me first?" Sirius asked.

"I will be accompanying you, and I will take care of anyone you do not," Tom responded, and he handed Sirius the same wand he had used before.

Sirius took the wand and looked down at it with loathing. "I won't do it."

"Yes, you will," Tom said impatiently.

Sirius shook his head, and decided that the time had come to make a stand. "No, I won't." And then, because he was unable to attack Tom, Sirius turned the wand on himself.

Next Chapter: Harry has a terrible nightmare about Voldemort; Neville has a talk with Albus.

Chapter 48: A Destiny Fulfilled

"Avada Kedav..." Sirius began to yell out.

"Crucio," Tom broke in, and he watched with satisfaction as the last syllable of the word 'Kedavra' changed into a scream, and the wand dropped from Sirius' hand at the shock of the pain.

After Tom finally released the pain spell, Sirius lay there panting, and he looked up. "I swear I'm going to find a way to kill you."

"Good luck with that," Tom said shortly, and he summoned the wand that Sirius had dropped. "You will never try to kill yourself again, and you will get up and take this wand and do exactly as I say."

His legs shaking, Sirius now had little choice but to take the wand, and he listened as Tom outlined what Severus had told him. "I know that the main entrance to Hogwarts is locked, and so you will need to find another way in. Do you know of any?" Tom did, but the only one he was aware of was almost impossible to get to without getting wet.

"No," Sirius lied, now intent on doing everything he could to thwart the man.

"Tell me the truth," Tom demanded.

"I know of an entrance," Sirius had to admit.

"Where is it?" Tom asked.

The phrasing of the question allowed Sirius to pick an entrance he was aware of that was difficult to get through, but was not the one he would use. The one he intended to use would hopefully mean that he would bump into less people. "It's beyond Slytherin, and it's underground. So I'll have to swim to get inside."

"You'll do whatever you have to," Tom said, before continuing. "Once inside the school, you will go to the hospital wing. The Dursley woman should be there. Kill her, and anyone else who gets in your way, and make it quick. Once you've done the job, get out, and head for apparition point 73, where I will be waiting for you."

"Do you honestly think that Albus won't know what I've done and stop me leaving?" Sirius questioned Tom's plan.

"That's your problem, not mine," Tom said. "But if you are caught you will say nothing about where you have been, who I am, or what you have experienced since we first met." After his order, Tom took Sirius' arm, and apparated with him before finishing his sentence. "But first we need to get you something for those shakes."

Sirius found himself in a very well stocked potions room. "It's nice what a little blood money will buy."

Tom failed to rise to Sirius' barb, and he shoved a vial at Sirius. "Drink this."

Sirius drank the potion, and within a few minutes his shaking had subsided. Tom nodded. "Good. Get your wand ready. I'll take the Aurors on the right, and you will kill all those on the left except for one. You will not alert them by any means, and you will carry this part out in a manner that is as expedient as possible."

Tom grabbed Sirius' arm again, and they vanished. Dawn was just starting to break as they reappeared in the bushes outside of Hogwarts, Tom pushed Sirius forwards while he headed across to the other side of the trail. Channeling his hatred of Tom, Sirius quickly killed the first Auror with a whispered, "Avada Kedavra." Across the trail a flash of green light also told him that Tom too was dealing with the Aurors as he had said he would.

Sirius' own attack had alerted the remaining two Aurors on his side to his presence, and he now found himself facing a very familiar face. Sirius wondered if Tom had somehow known Tonks would be there, and that was why he had chosen this night to attack. The thought was put on as ice though as Sirius was now faced with a choice. Another female Auror was with Tonks, and although he had no wish to harm either woman, he had to choose. And so, with Tom's warning about leaving an Auror alive still ringing in his ears, Sirius had little choice but to kill Tonks' compatriot, while at the same time, firing back at his cousin.

As an Auror, Tonks was good at dueling and she put up a determined fight. But as Severus had admitted to Ginny, Sirius was an excellent dueler. In fact Sirius had an innate talent for it, having

even defeated his school dueling teacher, Filius Flitwick, on more than occasion, and it therefore wasn't long before he overcame Tonks.

From out of the fading darkness, Tom came casually sauntering over. Spotting three bodies lying on the floor, he turned furiously on Sirius. "I told you to keep one alive."

"I did," Sirius said, pointing out a darkened outline. "She's just stunned."

Tom lit up the end of his wand and looked more closely at the woman Sirius had pointed at. "Isn't she your cousin?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes."

"Nicely played but I doubt she'll survive the Dementors roaming the grounds," Tom said, removing Tonks' wands. And then, after the stunt Sirius had pulled earlier, Tom reiterated his instructions in a manner that he believed would afford Sirius no way out. "After reviving your cousin, make sure she gets you through the wards. Then stun her – you can't afford to set off any wards. After that you will avoid the Dementors by whatever means necessary but you will do it in a manner least likely to draw attention to you. You will then immediately move to get inside the school, where you will do nothing to give anyone any warning. Then go immediately to the hospital wing where you will kill Petunia Dursley."

While Tom was speaking, Sirius positioned his own wand in readiness for the next step.

Tom moved away. "I'll be waiting for you at the agreed rendezvous point. And you will return to it as soon as you successfully complete your mission."

Sirius glanced over at the shadow in the moonlight. "And if I get caught?"

"Then I won't be seeing you again. Now revive her," Tom ordered, and he then vanished, leaving Sirius to do his job.

When Sirius revived her, Tonks began to struggle almost immediately, only stopping when Sirius whispered "Imperio." Then he told her what he needed her to do.

As she walked through the school gates, Tonks quickly became aware that she was under attack, and she began to fight against the curse's hold as she had been taught to by Moody. But she snapped out of it far too late, and she had helped Sirius gain access to the school before she could come fully to her senses. As she did, Sirius felt his hold on her snap, and he whispered. "I'm sorry, Tonks. " Then he whispered one final spell, and Tonks slumped in his arms.

Sirius shivered as he felt the cold wave which signaled the advance of the Dementors. Glancing over at where the shadow of the Whomping Willow stood against the fading night, Sirius came up with a plan; one which would not go against Tom's orders, but would enable him to save his cousin from a fate worse than death.

Once he had ensured Tonks' safety, Sirius stood just inside the Whomping Willow, the air temperature dropping suddenly. He knew that the Dementors had to be outside, and as Tom had told him to, he was going to have to avoid them. Sirius was unfortunately aware, however, that once he had done so he had no margin for tinkering with Tom's instructions.

After stilling the Willow, and running to the left of the Dementors, he reactivated the tree leaving Tonks safely inside, and changed into his Animagus form as the Dementors turned on him. Making the most of their confusion at the sudden disappearance of their prey, Sirius bounded up to the school.

Heading away from the front entrance, he made his way to the Hufflepuff secret entrance that was known to few, including Tom, and Sirius reverted to his human form. Placing his hand against a plaque that was covered in grass and moss, he uttered "Loyalty above all else", and a slab drew back allowing Sirius entrance, before sliding back into place again.

Hufflepuff

Ginny was by now almost beyond panic. She knew from Meredith that Harry had been hurt in an accident, but he still had not returned from the hospital wing. Aware of what Sirius would do to anyone who got in his way, Ginny was terribly afraid for Harry's safety. She was also terribly afraid for her own life and those of her family's if she tried to do anything to help.

But thinking about her family made Ginny realize that this was not what she believed her father would do, and she therefore got to her feet. "I have to do something." It was then it occurred to Ginny the only thing she could do.

Severus' lessons finally came into their own - although probably not for the use he ever expected them to be applied for - as Ginny invoked an invisibility spell upon herself. Then she let herself out of Hufflepuff, and headed towards the hospital wing.

She had no idea that as she let herself out, Sirius had just gained entrance from outside, and was going to be right on her heels as he also made his way to the hospital wing.

Hospital Wing

Petunia lay on the bed watching the arms of the clock on the wall move forward. "Ten minutes left."

Hearing the door open, together with the sound of heels clicking on the hard linoleum floor, Petunia sat up. After a whispered spell, the sound of footsteps abruptly ended. Her heart pounding, Petunia got up and went around the curtain to find no-one there. The sound of soft snoring was coming from Poppy's office, and Petunia was debating whether to wake her up when she noticed a side door opening but she could see no-one coming out or going in. This happened to every door of every side room. When it ended, Petunia's voice sounded small and afraid as she called out, "Who's there?"

No reply came back, although Petunia could have sworn that someone brushed against her. Petunia immediately headed into Poppy's office, intending to wake her up. However when Petunia shook her, the nurse failed to stir, and something told Petunia that

this sleep was far from natural. Then, thinking she heard a noise back in the ward, she whirled around. "Show yourself if you've come for me."

The disembodied voice of a young woman floated across to her. "I haven't come for you. I came to help. Where is Harry Potter?"

"You won't get my nephew," Petunia responded, believing that Harry too must also be a target. "He's somewhere safe."

"Good," the voice came back. Then the doors to the wing opened again, but no-one appeared, and Petunia guessed that the unseen young woman had departed. Petunia glanced at the clock. "Two minutes." Suddenly very afraid, Petunia went to head towards the door to follow the unseen girl out. Her heart gave a jolt when the door opened yet again, and again no-one visible came in. Backing up, Petunia asked again in a terrified voice, "Who's there?"

"I'm sorry," a man's voice reached Petunia's ears.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?" Petunia asked, gripping the side of a bed, as her legs began shaking.

"Yes," Sirius said, and although he struggled hard against himself, just as he had with the Aurors outside, he could not stop his wand arm from rising. "Avada Kedavra."

Having risen at five as he usually did, in his office, Albus rotated in surprise as the instrument that alerted him to trouble in the hospital wing began to shriek loudly. Apparating directly to the wing, he found no-one there, but Petunia's body was hard to miss. Turning, he aimed his wand at the doors, one of which appeared to be in the process of opening. "Obsido."

As the door slammed to, Albus sent a second spell hurtling in its direction. "Patesco."

Sirius shimmered into sight, and he aimed his wand at Albus. "Please don't make me hurt you."

Albus had no intention of getting hurt, and he turned on his wand on Sirius. "Put down your wand, or I will have to take it by force."

"Avada Kedavra," Sirius yelled out, Tom's instructions kicking in again as he was challenged by Albus.

Albus was not going to risk Poppy coming out and getting in the middle of a firefight, and so he sealed her door, while at the same time avoiding the killing curse; he then apparated behind Sirius.

As good a dueler as he was, Sirius was taken completely unawares by Albus' tactics. Knowing Albus as he did, Sirius had expected Albus to take him on face to face. Sirius therefore was in the motion of swinging around when Albus' first spell ensured that Sirius' wand flew out of his hand. Sirius then crumpled to the ground as Albus' second spell hit Sirius in the stomach as Sirius completed his rotation.

After binding Sirius, Albus checked Petunia for any signs of life, but, just as she had predicted would happen, she was dead. After checking on Poppy to find her under a sleeping spell, Albus used the counterspell to wake her up. "Poppy, I need to use your fireplace."

Poppy blinked as she tried to wake up. "I must have nodded off."

"I believe you were placed under a spell," Albus said, before moving on to what he needed. "I need to contact Amelia Bones, and while I do, I want you to keep an eye on Black."

Poppy suddenly found herself very much awake. "Black?"

"He's killed Petunia Dursley," Albus explained. "Please, if you would."

Her wand held out in front of her, Poppy headed into the main ward. She made sure not to disturb Petunia's body, as she knew that Amelia would have Aurors wanting to record the exact scene of the murder for evidence. Sirius Black was still unconscious, lying tied up in a mass of ropes.

A few minutes later, Albus came out. "Madam Bones was not at the Ministry."

"It is rather early," Poppy pointed out, glancing at the dimly lit clock on the wall. "Not everyone is an early riser."

"Her assistant, however, is," Albus said. "He's going to contact her at home, and arrange for Aurors to take Black away."

At that moment, Sirius groaned, and opened his eyes. His first thought was to apologize. "I'm sorry."

Albus ignored the apology. "Did you kill her?"

"I had to." Sirius tried to explain, but he stopped, unable to say more, Tom's specific orders preventing Sirius from doing so. But even so, Sirius still tried to fight the Imperius potion again. "I'm sorry, I made an effort..."

Albus rose up, and stood over Sirius, interrupting him. "I don't want your excuses, Black; I just want to know whether you killed Petunia Dursley or not."

"Yes," Sirius admitted, although he knew he was likely signing his own death warrant by doing so. "But..."

Angry with himself for failing to protect Petunia, Albus was far from in the mood to listen to Sirius' excuses or his pleading, and so Albus stunned him again. "Poppy, would you bear witness to the fact that Sirius Black confessed to the murder of Petunia Dursley at – here he looked at the clock – 5.18 a.m.?"

"Yes," Poppy said, barely able to take her eyes off a man she would have once said was one of the most loyal followers of the Light she knew. "But why didn't he simply kill me? Why use a sleeping spell?"

"I don't know," Albus had to admit. "Perhaps he couldn't bring himself to kill a nurse."

Poppy did not believe that was it. "His betrayal of the Potters led to the death of a baby, and he killed thirteen Muggles, and another former friend; to say nothing of what he did to Harry's friends and family. I can't believe he would let me live."

"You-Know-Who never attacked St. Mungo's," Albus pointed out. "Perhaps Black was just following that code of ethics."

Poppy snorted in derision. "Code of ethics?"

"They may not be to the same standard we would adhere to, but I believe that even You-Know-Who has a code of ethics," Albus shared his opinion. "It's certainly the only explanation I have for your survival."

Poppy had to admit that Albus had a point. "I suppose you must be right. I can't think of any other reason myself."

Albus invoked a strong sleeping spell on Sirius, not wanting him to wake again. "I think we should have some tea while we wait."

Before he could move, however, a banging began on the doors outside of the hospital wing. Albus withdrew his wand again. "Stay out of sight."

Poppy did not want to hide, but unwilling to disobey the Headmaster, she did as he asked, but she did not go far, staying just behind the curtain where Petunia had had her bed, her wand in her hand.

Albus aimed his wand at the doors, and they flew open. Any spell that was about to be fired, died on his lips as a bloody and limping Tonks hobbled in. "What's the password?"

"Gateway," Tonks gave the password that had been changed only that morning.

Albus lowered his wand, and called out. "Madam Pomfrey, Auror Tonks needs help."

Poppy bustled out. "What happened to you?"

"The Whomping Willow and him." Tonks pointed to where her cousin was lying on the floor. "He killed my fellow Aurors, and stunned me." She winced as Poppy rubbed an ointment onto her face. "I'm sorry, Headmaster, but when he revived me, he use the Imperious curse on me, and I let him into the grounds."

"How did you get hit by the Whomping Willow?" Albus asked, sitting down beside Tonks as Poppy continued to clean her up.

"After using me to get into the grounds, Black stunned me, and when I came to I was in a dark passage," Tonks explained. "I made my way out towards a patch of light, and the next thing I knew I was

hit in the face with a branch. Not having my wand, I couldn't stop the tree, and so I morphed into the biggest man I could, and then barged my way out."

"You've got a broken arm," Poppy told the girl. "Grit your teeth."

Tonks gave the smallest of groans as her bone slid back into place. "Ouch."

"It's done," Poppy said, handing Tonks a painkilling potion. "You can take this now."

Tonks looked at Petunia's body. "Do you think she was his target?"

"Yes," Albus said. "He said he had to kill her. But he put Poppy to sleep."

"You don't attack medical personnel," Tonks immediately said, confirming Albus' own hypothesis. "You-Know-Who didn't, and as far as I'm aware, neither did Grindelwald."

"And I believe Black let you live so that your death would not set off any alarms," Albus deduced.

"But why place me in the Whomping Willow?" Tonks asked. "He could have simply left me at the hands of the Dementors that roam around at night."

"You're family," Poppy said. "Perhaps even someone as unprincipled as him has to draw the line somewhere."

"Or perhaps he was hoping the tree would kill you," Albus said as he turned his wand on Sirius. "Let's see."

Sirius opened up his eyes to find the trio looking at him. He was thoroughly relieved to see his cousin alive, if looking a little battered. "Tonks, thank goodness."

Tonks was far from caring about Sirius' relief. "Do not use my name as though you give a damn. You killed some good people today."

"I had to in order to gain access to the school," Sirius said, now deciding he would do whatever it took to make sure he ended up dead, and not back in the misery that was Azkaban.

"Who was with you?" Tonks asked. "And don't deny it, I saw spells being cast."

"I can't tell you," Sirius said. "Not even if you give me Veritaserum."

"Don't worry, we will be," Tonks promised, although she expected it to fail. "Why did you leave me alive?"

"You're my cousin," Sirius answered. "I couldn't let you die."

"And me?" Poppy interrupted.

"I never did anything to you," Sirius said. "I would never hurt you."

All three listeners misconstrued Sirius' response, believing that Sirius meant that he had never had any intention of hurting Poppy, and not that he had actually done nothing at all to the woman, which meant that Ginny's actions would go unnoticed.

Tonks got to her feet as she spotted a contingent of Aurors coming up the hallway, and she decided it was time that Sirius was officially charged. "Sirius Orion Black, you have admitted to the deaths of Petunia Dursley, Emily Robirch, and Matthew Gladwing. You are also an accessory in the murders of Tamsin Dunst, Neville Large, and Robert Halliwell. I am therefore remanding you into custody until a trial can be arranged where you will be tried for these crimes."

Albus knew that a trial would not be necessary, but Tonks had a procedure to follow, and so he let her spout off her spiel. When she had finished speaking, he vanished the ropes from Sirius' upper body, allowing one of the new arrivals to fit Sirius with magical handcuffs, before Albus also vanished the ropes on Sirius' lower half. Sirius was then hefted to his feet, and frog-marched out.

Poppy placed a hand on Tonks' arm as she tried to leave. "I want to check that bone before you go anywhere, young lady. You should know how this works by now."

Tonks was annoyed, but also grateful that she did not have to look at her cousin any longer.

As Sirius was making his way towards the exit of the building, Amelia was just arriving. However, by now, it was almost time for breakfast, and some of the students had already started to head towards the Great Hall in anticipation.

Remus, who was also heading that way, stopped in surprise to see how many Aurors were accompanying Amelia. And his first thought was for Harry. "What's happened? Is Harry okay?"

"Harry is fine as far as I am aware," Amelia assured him, not aware of Harry's accident the previous night. "It's his Aunt. She's been killed by Sirius Black."

"Black?" Remus couldn't help but ask.

"Albus caught him just after he did it." Amelia knew how close Remus had once been to Sirius, and she put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Remus thought of all the damage his former friend had done. "I'm pleased he's been caught."

Both of them turned as Albus and four Aurors entered the foyer, Sirius being dragged along in the middle of them.

For the first time in almost thirteen years, Remus and Sirius stared into each other's eyes. Sirius was the first to speak. "Please believe me, Moony. I didn't want to do it."

"Then why did you?" Remus asked, his voice unexpectedly shaking.

"I had to," Sirius said.

Disgusted and not trusting himself not to attack Sirius, Remus turned away, and began to walk off, only to see Harry and Justin coming his way. He was surprised to see Harry up and about after his accident the previous night. "Harry, what are you doing up?"

"I'm fine," Harry said. "Madam Pomfrey fixed me up in no time, and I spent the night with Aunt Minnie so that I'd be out of Aunt Petunia's

way. And even though I can't play until Madam Pomfrey clears me, I'm still going to watch the practice this morning. But we're just going to get some breakfast first."

When Harry went to sidestep him, Remus shook his head. "Harry, I don't think this is a good time for breakfast."

It was only then that Harry looked beyond Remus, and he spotted the entourage. As the dark-haired man looked over, Harry suddenly realized who he was, and he stiffened. "That's Black, isn't it?"

"Harry, I think you should come away," Remus said, not answering Harry's question.

Harry shook off Remus' hand, and he walked further along until he stood about thirty feet from Sirius, Remus and Justin flanking him. "Did you come to kill me?"

Sirius shook his head. "I would never hurt you, Harry."

"I don't believe you," Harry said, his voice cold. "You killed my family. You handed them to Riddle."

Sirius denied it. "I didn't betray them, Harry. Wormtail did."

Amelia stepped in. "Harry, I need to take him away."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "I want him to tell me why he betrayed my family."

"I swear I didn't," Sirius said. "I loved James like a brother, and..."

"Liar!" Harry screamed, rage rising up in him at Sirius' words. "You killed him, and you killed my Mum and my brother.."

Sirius wished there was something he could do to ease Harry's pain. "I'm sor..."

"Don't tell me you're sorry," Harry shrieked. "You stole my family from me, and left me to live with people who hated me, and then you went after them. I hate you."

Sirius felt as though he had been punched in the gut at Harry's words. "I am sorry."

It was then that Harry wondered what Sirius was doing there, if he wasn't after him. "Is my Aunt safe?" Harry caught the look that passed between Amelia and Remus, and he knew then that she was not. And even though Harry had hated Petunia, it was just the last straw for him, and he withdrew his wand, aiming it at the man who he believed had betrayed his family. "You bastard!"

Realizing what Harry was about to do, Remus managed to grab Harry's left arm as he lurched forward. "No, Harry!"

"He deserves to die," Harry screamed, his anger blinding him to reason, and he yelled out, "Reducto!"

Remus couldn't reach Harry's wand arm in time, but Justin did, using the bushy end of his broomstick to push the wand upwards so that its target was now the ceiling.

As the spell blasted through the broomstick and hit the ceiling, Remus tugged Harry backwards, and covered his body with his own. Others followed suit, hiding their faces as a massive explosion caused a huge chunk of stone to fall to the floor, landing just inches from where Sirius was standing, and sending debris flying all around the Great Hall.

Unable to defend himself, Sirius' face was now paper white, except for where razor sharp bits of stone had pierced his skin, sending small red rivulets of blood running down his cheeks. Sirius ignored the pain as he tried once more to speak to the boy who was being cradled by Remus. "Harry,..."

"I hate you," Harry repeated his earlier sentiment, still fighting to get clear of Remus' grasp, which had tightened, preventing Harry from moving at all. "And I hope they throw you to the Dementors."

When the windows and doors began vibrating, Amelia decided that enough was enough. "Get Black out of here now."

As Sirius was led away, Harry began to struggle even harder in order to get to Sirius, but Remus held him firmly against his chest. "He's not worth it, Harry."

Harry tried to pull free. "Let me go."

"I can't do that, Harry," Remus refused, and he continued to hold onto Harry, talking softly to him. "He's not worth it, Harry. He's not worth it."

As Remus repeated his words, Harry slowly began to relax against him, and the windows and doors stopped shaking.

Albus turned to those students who were standing and gawking. "Breakfast is upon us. I suggest you move along to the Great Hall." When they were slow to move, he barked out sharply. "Now!"

Unused to hearing Albus speak in such a severe manner, the students scurried off as quickly as they could. Albus turned to Severus, who by now had joined them. "I want this area sealed off. It isn't safe." Albus knew he could repair the ceiling, but he also needed to have someone check the structure just to make sure that there was no deeper damage.

In Remus' arms, Harry suddenly gave a howl of misery and started to cry. Remus stroked his back as he wept. "I've got you, Harry. Everything is going to be alright."

Albus turned to Remus. "Bring him to my office. Mr. Finch-Fletchley, you should come also."

Minerva was on her way down the stairs when she ran into everyone coming up. She was immediately concerned when she noticed that Harry was being supported by Remus and crying. "Are you hurt, Harry?"

Harry didn't answer her, and continued to cry into Remus' chest. The group continued on their way into Albus' office where, once inside, Remus moved to a chair, placing Harry on his lap, and rocking him gently. Only then did he explain. "He's just had a terrible shock, Minerva. He was heading for breakfast when Albus brought Black out. Harry tried to kill him."

"Black?" Minerva asked in confusion.

Albus quickly filled her in. "... and I'm afraid that I need to go to the Ministry to set up an emergency session of the Wizengamot."

"A trial for Black?" Remus asked, looking up over Harry's head.

"There doesn't have to be one, although there will need to be a formal session up for sentencing," Albus said.

Justin was confused. "Why doesn't there have to be a trial?"

Albus realized that unlike the adults in the room, Justin had no idea of how the Wizengamot functioned, and so he explained. "Black admitted his guilt, and I had a witness to it, so I only need to show my memory of the event for the Wizengamot to find him guilty."

"Do you think he'll get the death penalty when they do?" Remus mentioned the law which had been brought back in after Sirius' attacks on Harry's friends' families.

"Yes," Albus couldn't see it going any other way.

Remus was concerned about Harry after what he had tried to do. "And what about Harry?"

"I doubt very much that Amelia will press charges," Albus said. "And I will be recommending that none be brought up." Albus patted Harry on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, my boy."

Harry said nothing, keeping his head buried in Remus' chest. Albus then took his leave.

As silence fell, Justin brought up the reason he and Harry had been up so early. "I need to let the team know that there's a problem."

"I can arrange for someone else to do that," Minerva said. "I will also be postponing the match until tomorrow, but I suggest you field a reserve for Harry."

"I'd like to tell the team myself," Justin said. "But I will be back."

"I'm going to take Harry home," Remus told him. "So you should go back to Hufflepuff afterwards."

Justin left, rather disappointed but understanding. Hufflepuff had had a good chance of taking the Cup, but with Harry out of action, he had a bad feeling that Slytherin were going to overtake them.

Remus and Minerva talked quietly until Harry eventually calmed down enough to speak. The first thing he did was to apologize. "I'm sorry. I just lost it when I saw him."

"I wanted to kill him as well," Remus had to admit. "But he's not worth giving up your friends and family for."

Harry had no chance to answer as the fireplace flared up, and Albus' head appeared in it. "I'm rather busy but I just wanted to let you know that Amelia concurs with my decision not to press any charges against Harry. Like me, she has come to the conclusion that Harry was not thinking straight, and was rather distraught."

Remus felt Harry sag with relief. "Thank you, Albus."

"I have to go," Albus said. "The Wizengamot are assembling."

As the fire died down, Harry climbed off Remus' lap, feeling a little self-conscious. "Thanks for stopping me."

"No problem, but I think you should also thank Justin for stepping in when he did," Remus said. "And I also think you might owe him a new broomstick."

Recalling the rather large chunk of ceiling that had crashed to the ground, Harry suddenly thought of something else. "Am I going to get into trouble for destroying the school?"

Minerva was confused, Albus not having mentioned this part. "What do you mean?"

Remus told her what had happened. "When Harry tried to kill Black, Justin used his broomstick to knock Harry's wand up into the air, and a large chunk of the ceiling came crashing down. He almost saved the Wizengamot the trouble of having to meet."

"I couldn't help myself," Harry said. "I just wanted to hurt Black as much as he has hurt me." It was then that Harry remembered about Dudley. "What's going to happen to my cousin?"

"Albus will petition the court to find him another home," Minerva said.

Harry loathed Dudley but he was also aware that if the Dursley family had not taken him in, albeit reluctantly, then none of this would have happened to them. "Remus, do you think Cordelia would mind if I asked if Dudley could live with us, at least if he wants to?"

Remus was far from keen on the idea but it was Harry's house, and he had a sneaking suspicion that Cordelia would agree to Harry's request. "We can talk to her when I take you home."

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to be away from school this time. I really don't need to grieve but I would like to talk to Cordelia about Dudley."

Minerva stood up. "Harry, your reaction to Black today suggests that maybe you do need to grieve; maybe not for your aunt, but for your parents and brother. I will talk to Professor Sprout and tell her that you are excused from school until Wednesday."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Come here," Minerva held out her arms.

Harry gladly went into them. "Aunt Minnie, can I still come by on Wednesday night even though I almost blew up the school?"

"Harry, you're always welcome in my rooms, no matter how much of the school you destroyed," Minerva said, half smiling. "And I'm sure the damage isn't that bad."

"It's pretty bad," Harry admitted. "And I'm not sure how safe it is."

"The Headmaster has already asked Professor Snape to get on to it," Remus said, not entirely sure if Harry had heard. "And if you would like to go and pack, I'll collect you in a few minutes."

Potter Place

Cordelia was rather surprised to see Remus and Harry. "What's happened?"

Remus filled her in, and Cordelia immediately went to Harry, hugging him against her. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"We never really got on," Harry said trying to make light of his aunt's death, not wanting to start crying again.

"What about your cousin?" Cordelia asked, her thoughts immediately going out to the other person affected by Petunia's death. "What will happen to him?"

"Albus wants to place him with a wizarding family," Remus said. "But Harry was toying with the idea of him living here."

"He's family," Cordelia immediately said. "We can't just dump him on somebody else."

Harry felt warm inside that Cordelia considered both him, and surprisingly Dudley, family. "I didn't want to make an offer unless I cleared it with you." He glanced at Remus. "And you."

"Of course he has to stay here," Cordelia said, turning to Remus. "Doesn't he?"

Any objections Remus might have voiced vanished under the concerned look Cordelia was displaying. But he did warn her. "Dudley is going to be quite a handful."

"I'm sure he'll do just fine," Cordelia said, not realizing how much she was going to regret her words.

May 31st, 1995

Cordelia was ready to scream. During the time he had been staying with her, Dudley had driven her almost to the edge of insanity and back again. Talking to herself, she tried to calm down as she cleaned up the mess Dudley had left in the kitchen after making a sandwich. "He's just a child who's lost his mother and father, and he's upset, Cordelia."

Hearing a bang, she looked upwards. "What is he doing now?" Shaking her head, she put down the cloth she was using, and

headed upstairs. Once outside the room Dudley had been given, she knocked on the door, and opened it slightly. "Dudley, can I come in?"

Dudley scowled but acquiesced. "I suppose."

Cordelia wrinkled her nose as she entered the room. Dudley's clothes were strewn everywhere, and she was sure that he had not taken a shower since he had arrived. "Dudley, is there any chance you could possibly pick up your clothes?"

"Just magic them away," Dudley responded in a surly voice.

"I'm a squib," Cordelia reminded him. "I'm unable to do magic."

"You can cook food," Dudley countered. "I've seen you with your wand."

"It's a training wand, just like the one Remus got for you," Cordelia said for the tenth time. "And just like you, I have enough magical power to tap the wall plates so that I can turn on lights, turn on the cooker to make food, and use the shower."

Amazingly Dudley got the hint. "I can't make the shower work."

Cordelia looked around the room. "Where's your wand?"

"Dunno," Dudley said, shrugging.

Cordelia walked into the bathroom, which was almost as bad as the bedroom. Grabbing the linen basket she dragged it into the bedroom. "I think we should pick up your clothes, and then perhaps we'll find it."

Dudley could not have cared less, but reluctantly, and very slowly, he began to pick his clothes. However, it was Cordelia who did most of the work. She looked at the overflowing basket once the bedroom was clear. "I'll be right back."

When she came back she had another basket. "Let's tackle the bathroom."

Dudley was again reticent to help. "Mum used to do this for me."

"I think you should learn how to do it yourself," Cordelia responded, "for when you eventually have a place of your own."

Dudley stopped what he was doing. "When is Potter going to kick me out?"

Cordelia also stopped what she was doing. "Harry won't be kicking you out."

"Of course he will," Dudley responded. "I know he's only done this because of what happened to Mum but he'll eventually kick me out."

"Harry said you have a home here for as long as you need it," Cordelia reassured him. "He's also agreed to pay your tuition to attend a local school."

"Private school?" Dudley asked in shock.

"Yes," Cordelia nodded. "Remus talked to Harry about you, and it was decided that in September you'll be attending a school that will cater to your needs."

"You mean a school for 'special' people?" Dudley waved his fingers in the air at the word 'special'.

"I'm sorry?" Cordelia asked, not quite understanding.

"Potter thinks I'm dumb, so I bet it's a school for stupid kids," Dudley explained.

"It's a school that encourages smaller classroom sizes meaning that you will get more attention," Cordelia clarified what she had meant by 'catering to Dudley's needs'. "Some of the children who attend are close to genius level, and some, like you, need a little encouragement."

"So it's not a school for morons?" Dudley asked.

"Absolutely not, and 'moron' is not a nice word to use, and I don't ever want to hear you using it again," Cordelia warned him.

Dudley scowled. "I still don't want to go to the stupid school."

Cordelia had a feeling that Dudley did want to go, but that he was afraid. "If you're worried about it, I can take you to look around tomorrow."

"I'm not worried," Dudley immediately denied the possibility.

"In that case, I think we should finish picking up in here," Cordelia said, "and then we will find your wand."

Dudley finally found it behind the back of the rather dirty toilet. "You're going to make me clean this, aren't you?"

"I am," Cordelia confirmed. "And then you're going to take a shower."

"But the stupid wand doesn't work," Dudley protested.

"Hold it in your hand like this," Cordelia used her own training wand to demonstrate.

Dudley did it reluctantly. "'kay."

"Now concentrate, and tap the pad," Cordelia said, doing it first.

Dudley watched water flow out of the shower head. His face contorted, and he tapped the panel. The water continued to flow out. "See, it doesn't work."

"You're trying too hard," Cordelia said. "Relax, and don't hold the wand so tightly, otherwise you'll end up snapping it."

Dudley relaxed his grip. "So I just think what I want, and tap the panel?"

"Exactly," Cordelia said, hoping that this time it would work.

Dudley tapped the panel, and the water stopped. His delight was evident. "That was cool. I stopped the water." Then his face fell. "I wish I was like Professor Snape though."

Cordelia was aware that Slytherin had hosted Dudley until he had been placed into her care, and this was not the first time that Dudley had expressed his wish to be like Severus. "He showed you some magic?"

"He turned me into a dragon," Dudley revealed. "It was way cool."

Cordelia was far from impressed. "He turned you into a dragon?"

"I wanted him to show me how to turn someone into a frog, but he made me a dragon instead," Dudley said, finally realizing that maybe he should have kept quiet. "But it's okay. He didn't hurt me or anything."

Having enough on her plate already, Cordelia decided to let it go. "Well, I'm afraid that neither of us is ever going to be able to perform that sort of magic."

"Why not?" Dudley asked, more than a little miffed. "Why am I a squib thing, and Potter gets to be a real magician?"

"First of all, you should start calling him Harry," Cordelia said. "And secondly, he's a wizard, not a magician."

"Kay," Dudley said reluctantly.

Cordelia went on. "And we're both squibs because for some reason we didn't get enough magic when we were inside our mothers to make us a fully-fledged wizard or witch."

"Does it bother you?" Dudley asked.

"Sometimes," Cordelia admitted. "Especially when I wish I could take a shortcut." She smiled. "Like in cleaning your room up."

Dudley had believed Cordelia to be very much in control, and to discover that she wanted more, just like him, made him feel better. "I'll try and keep it tidier."

Cordelia recognized this as an apology. "Thank you. And now I will find you some cleaning fluids, and you can tackle the toilet. Then I suggest you clean your wand, and after that you can take a shower."

"Can we go outside when I'm done?" Dudley asked, fed up of being shut up indoors.

"Where would you like to go?" Cordelia asked.

"To see a movie," Dudley immediately said, having missed television horribly since he had moved into a safe house. "And maybe get a pizza?"

Cordelia decided that these things could only help to establish a more harmonious relationship between the two of them, and so she agreed to Dudley's requests. "Clean up the bathroom properly, and then we will go to a movie of your choice, and get a pizza afterwards."

Dudley gave Cordelia a genuinely grateful smile. "Thanks, Mrs. Futchley."

Cordelia realized that Dudley obviously had forgotten that she had a different last name from Justin, although Dudley had also botched Justin's surname as well. "My name is Cordelia Graham, but you can call me Ms. Graham, which is rather formal; Cordelia, as Harry does; or Aunt Cordie, as Luna does."

Dudley decided on the final option. "Aunt Cordie."

"Then Aunt Cordie it is," Cordelia agreed. "Towels are in the cupboard but only take a shower after you've finished cleaning the toilet. And make sure you put your dirty clothes in the basket."

"Kay", Dudley said, and he shut the bathroom door.

Cordelia let herself out of the bedroom, and leant against the wall. "Thank goodness for that." But even as she said it, Cordelia knew that winning Dudley over was not going to be as simple as offering him pizza and a movie. Sighing she headed downstairs to finish on the kitchen.

Gryffindor – 6th June 1995

Neville looked at the letter he had received from France the previous day. It was a less thinly-veiled warning that he had better get the blood he had promised to, and it gave him two days to do so. After withdrawing the vial that had been sitting in his trunk since he first took it, Neville sat staring at it for a long time. Then he began to wrap it up, whispering, "I'm sorry, Harry, but I have to do this."

France – 8th June 1995

Voldemort greedily grabbed the vial of blood from Bellatrix that had just arrived that morning. "I was beginning to think the boy had failed me."

"I think our last warning finally got his attention," Bellatrix said, watching the grotesque figure play with the vial.

Voldemort looked up, and smirked. "A little death threat always works wonders."

"So, when would you like to begin the ritual?" Bellatrix asked.

"Tonight," Voldemort said. "We do it tonight."

Hufflepuff

Harry sat bolt upright, screaming at the top of his lungs. Then as he came awake, his stomach lurched, and he leant over his bed, vomiting until his stomach was empty.

Across the room, Justin and Ernie woke up, Justin moving to Harry's side. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry was shivering like a whippet. "I saw him, Justin, I saw him."

Justin vanished the mess Harry had made, and picked up Harry's dressing gown. "I'm taking you to Professor McGonagall."

Harry offered up no resistance, and he let Justin lead him out of the Hufflepuff dorm, and into the common room, and then on to the exit.

Minerva answered the door to the urgent tapping, her hair in rollers, and clad in her nightclothes. "Come in." Justin led Harry to sit down as Minerva lit the fire. "What's wrong?"

Harry was still shivering, and Justin removed his own dressing gown and also placed this around his friend. "He was screaming, and then he was sick. He said something about he saw him."

Minerva knelt down. "Harry, who did you see?"

Harry tried hard to control his chattering teeth while he answered. "Y... Y... You-Know-Who."

Minerva gasped. "But how?"

Harry shook his head. "D... d... don't know."

"I think a little calming potion is called for," Minerva decided, and she headed for her small store of various potions she kept for emergencies such as this.

After Harry had taken the potion, his shivering began to cease, and his teeth no longer chattered. "Thanks."

"Can you tell us what you saw, Harry?" Minerva asked, placing a blanket around Justin's shoulders as he too was now shivering, the castle still cold inside despite the warmer temperatures that had begun to move across the country as summer got closer.

Because of the potion, Harry was able to speak calmly about what he had seen. "In my dream I was standing in a field, and there was a big house behind it. A large cauldron was sitting on a fire, and a woman with long, dark hair was carrying something that looked almost like a baby. She dropped it into the cauldron."

"Do you know who she is?" Minerva asked.

Harry nodded. "She looked a lot like the wanted poster I've seen of Bellatrix Lestrange."

Minerva was rather disturbed by this, and encouraged Harry to go on. "Please continue."

"She then began reciting something. I can't remember exactly what she said; something about bones, flesh, and blood." Harry stopped for a moment, before continuing. "When she said about flesh of a servant, she pulled out a knife and sliced off her hand, dropping it into the cauldron."

"Is that why you were sick?" Justin interrupted.

"Partly," Harry said. "But what came next was worse. There was a blinding flash, and a naked man, with the most awful face I've ever seen, rose up from nowhere. Then just as suddenly he exploded. It was as if a bomb had gone off inside of him."

Justin understood why Harry had been sick now. "That's awful, Harry."

Harry rubbed his head. "I think seeing You-Know-Who exploding and covering the woman in blood and stuff, and the searing pain I experienced in my head made me sick."

"How do you know it was You-Know-Who?" Justin asked.

"I just know," Harry said, unable to explain his gut feeling.

"Is there anything else?" Minerva pressed.

Harry nodded, his face showing his concern. "After he exploded, the woman screamed out something about Neville Longbottom. I don't know why."

Minerva suspected that Harry was correct in his suspicions about the woman's identity. "Lestrangle and Neville's parents have a history, Harry. Is there any more?"

Harry shook his head. "I woke up then."

"We need to report this to Albus," Minerva decided. "Harry, I'll arrange for you to have some hot chocolate. Justin, please stay with him."

Gryffindor – The Next Day

After closing his bed curtains, with trembling hands Neville unwrapped the parcel, which the large hawk had delivered at breakfast. Inside it was a vial containing a silver liquid, and a note dated the previous day. Neville immediately unfolded the note and began to read it:

"Longbottom,

You have kept your side of the bargain, so I am keeping mine. Enclosed is a vial of Alienari Restituo. This potion will restore one of your parents to good health, and heal their mind. However, there is a catch. For the potion to become effective, it will require the magical core of a witch or wizard."

Neville stopped reading for a moment to take this in. "Magical core?" Dropping his head, he continued to read:

"You, or whomever you choose to sacrifice, will need to be touching whichever parent you decide to save. Then administer the potion. A few minutes later it will all be over, and your parent will be restored, and your sacrifice will be dead.

LV"

Neville put down the letter and looked at the vial. He now had the means to save one parent but he or someone else would have to die to do it. Neville loved both of his parents but not enough to give up his own life to save them, nor could he think of anyone else who might consider doing so. He therefore reread the note, before folding it up, and placing it and the vial in his trunk. He then picked up the homework he needed for potions, intending to leave to head for classes.

He jumped at a knock at the door, and his heart began to pound when he discovered who was on the other side of the door. "Good morning, Headmaster."

"Good morning, Mr. Longbottom," Albus greeted him politely. "I wonder if we could have a little discussion."

Neville's heart began to beat even faster. "What about, Sir?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Albus said, and he watched Neville pale. "I'm sorry to bring her up, but I have good reason to believe she may be coming after you."

"Me?" Neville squeaked fearfully.

"Yes," Albus said as he led the shaking boy to sit down. "A reliable source witnessed a botched resurrection attempt by her, and she screamed out your name. We therefore believe that she is coming after you."

Neville could not speak; fear robbing him of his voice. Albus totally misconstrued the reason behind the fear. "We have arranged for extra Aurors to be positioned outside of Gryffindor, Mr. Longbottom. And this dorm room will be warded for your safety."

Neville could not stop shaking, although he finally found his voice. "But Black got in, and killed Harry's aunt."

"She was in the hospital wing, and it was not guarded," Albus told him. "Gryffindor will be."

Although he was terrified to ask, Neville needed to know if Albus suspected what he had done. "Do you know why she wants me?"

Albus shook his head. "No, but after what she did to your parents, and given the fragile state of Lestrange's mind, I believe she blames you for what happened to her master."

Neville could not help himself and he began to cry. Albus gently patted him on the back. "I'm sorry to upset you like this, but you had to know."

Neville jerkily nodded, and tried to quell his tears. Albus handed him a handkerchief. "Use this. You're excused from classes today. I'll ask Mr. Weasley to join you."

Neville really began to cry when Ron came in. Alarmed, Ron sat down on the bed next to him. "Nev, the Headmaster told me about Lestrange. Why is she coming after you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Neville said, unable to tell his friend the truth about what he had done.

Unusually for Ron, he showed a little tact, and instead of pestering his friend, he sat quietly next to him, and let Neville cry.

Next Chapter: Severus reveals his true colors; Harry receives devastating news; Tom has an unexpected visitor.

Chapter 49: Murder Most Foul

14th June 1995

Minerva noted a disturbance in the wards, and with Albus' absence from school on Wizengamot business, she got up from her seat. She initially thought about asking Remus to accompany her, but then Minerva remembered that as there had been a full moon the night before, Remus would be in no state to assist her. She therefore alerted Severus, and together the two of them headed towards the school gates.

On arriving, Minerva sucked in her breath with shock at the sight of the woman with only one hand. "Lestrangle."

Bellatrix met Minerva's gaze, but made no attempt to pull her wand. "I want Longbottom. The little bastard betrayed my Master, and I want him."

It was immediately clear to Minerva that the woman was mad. "Where are the Aurors?"

"Dead!" Bellatrix gave an evil smile, and she finally pulled out her wand. "They're all dead."

Minerva found herself believing the woman, although she had no idea how she had bested six Aurors. "You killed your own cousin?"

"She was a blood traitor," Bellatrix said triumphantly, and she threw her wand into air. "And she deserved to die, just like you're going to die." Cackling, she began to dance around.

"I'd like to see you try without a wand," Minerva remarked in an acerbic voice, the wand having landed to the right of her, well inside the wards.

"I don't think it's going to be so difficult," Bellatrix said slyly, peeping out from behind the mass of black hair that had fallen around her face, and she glanced behind Minerva at Severus, a small smile playing across her lips. "Do you, Severus?"

Minerva gave Bellatrix a scorn filled look. "Do you really think I'd turn my back on you even without your wand in your hand?"

"It isn't me you need to be worrying about," Bellatrix said, screeching gleefully.

It was then that Minerva realized that Bellatrix's wand had gone from the ground. And she finally began to turn around, but it was too late, and the green flash of the killing curse hit her firmly in the back.

Ignoring his colleague's body, Severus marched over to the gates. "Bellatrix, what are you doing here?"

"Longbottom betrayed us," she announced. "Our Master is gone. The resurrection ritual failed and he's gone."

Severus glanced nervously behind Bellatrix towards the woods. "You're sure you killed all the Aurors?"

Bellatrix nodded. "Even with one hand it was too easy."

Severus withdrew his wand. "Just like this is going to be. Avada Kedavra."

Bellatrix died with a stunned look on her face, and Severus stepped outside of the gates and planted Bellatrix's wand back in her hand. He then headed into the woods, discovering that there were only five Aurors, who were all dead. However, Tonks was not amongst them. Aware that there should have been six Aurors, he could only deduce that somehow Tonks had escaped. "Pity."

As he was checking the bodies, Severus had no idea that he was being observed by an almost imperceptible mist; a mist that was now rather angry about what had just transpired, but could do little about it. If Severus had been weak minded, the mist would have invaded his body and taken him over, but it was already aware that the ploy would fail almost instantly. So instead the mist floated silently behind Severus, barely caressing his heel as he walked back into the school. The wards, of course, registered the newcomer even as a mist, but as it was touching Severus, they failed to stop it.

Once inside the school, the mist drifted behind Severus, before veering off towards the Owlery. Asleep on her perch, Hedwig had no idea that she was in danger until it was far too late.

BritAD

Severus finished reporting what had happened to Amelia. "I can't believe Minerva turned around. I... I..." His voice broke, and then strengthened. "I cast the killing curse at Lestrage, but I was too late to save Minerva."

"Why didn't you use a stunning curse?" Amelia asked.

"I just reacted instinctively," Severus replied, his voice fearful. "Will I be charged?"

Amelia always weighed up a case like this on its merits, and although she did not like Severus, under the circumstances, she had decided not to press any charges, but she did issue a warning. "Not this time. But please bear in mind, Professor Snape, that should there be a repeat incident then I may have to review my decision." Amelia went on. "What happened afterwards?"

Severus told the complete truth this time. "I headed out of the school to check on the Aurors, but they were already dead. And although Lestrage said she had killed Tonks, I was unable to find her body."

"Auror Tonks was attacked and injured quite extensively." Amelia's solemn tone reflected her dismay at what had happened. "But she managed to leave the area, and I spoke to her before they took her into surgery. She confirmed that it was Lestrage who attacked her, although Auror Tonks did not see her fellow Aurors die."

"Do you know how Lestrage managed to overcome six Aurors?" Severus asked, rather curious.

"I was hoping you could tell me," Amelia said, watching a frown christen Severus' face. "I am not saying that I think you had anything to do with it, but given your history I was hoping you might have some insight into how Lestrage managed to kill them."

Severus was genuinely at a loss. "I would need a little more information than you have so far provided."

"Auror Tonks said that they were split into three teams of two: two were in the left of the woods to the gates, two to the right, and two guarding the actual gates," Amelia passed on what Tonks had told her. "Auror Tonks was in the woods to the right with her fellow guard, Auror Jakes, and she said she noticed nothing unusual. Nor did she suspect anything when Auror Jakes suddenly excused himself. He did not, however, return. A few minutes later, Auror Tonks said she experienced a strange feeling, almost as if someone was trying to persuade her in her own head to drop her wand."

"Like the Imperious curse?" Severus asked.

Amelia shook her head. "I asked her the same question, but she said it was different. She said that it was almost as if there was someone else in her head with her. Just as she managed to shake off the sensation, Lestrangle came from behind and used the Petrificus spell on her. Unable to defend herself, Auror Tonks was silenced and tortured. Auror Tonks eventually passed out, and when she came to, Lestrangle had gone. Auror Tonks was unable to move, however, since Lestrangle had broken her back and her legs. Thankfully the silencing spell had faded, allowing Auror Tonks to use her Auror's ring to take her to St. Mungo's."

Severus had a feeling he knew exactly how Bellatrix had done it. If the resurrection ritual had failed, then their Master would have reverted to an almost gaseous state in which he would have had the ability to enter someone's mind. While he suspected that most able minded wizards would be able to fight it off, it would still be disorientating enough to distract a person long enough to overpower them. "I'm afraid I have no idea. It isn't anything I've come across before."

"If you do think of anything, please let me know," Amelia said. She then held out her hand. "I apologize for doing this, but for the sake of completeness, I still need to check your wand, Professor Snape."

"Of course." Severus handed it over, and he waited while the head of Auror Division cast Prior Incantato on it. Just one killing curse and several mundane spells came out.

Amelia dispelled the shadows of the previously cast spells, and then she handed Severus the wand back. "Just like you, Lestrangle only

had one killing curse that came out. The other spells show that she tortured and killed my men by other means."

Severus did the right thing and offered his condolences, which Amelia accepted, her voice heavy with pain. "Thank you, Professor Snape. And thank you for your co-operation."

"If there is anything else I can do..." Severus immediately offered.

Amelia shook her head. "With both yours and Auror Tonks' testimonies, it's an open and shut case. I'll be writing up a report, and I will just need your signature to it."

"I will be happy to do provide it," Severus said. He was about to rise to leave when a knock sounded at the door.

Amelia got up and opened it, speaking briefly with the Auror outside. When she returned, her face was grave. "I'm afraid I have some more bad news..."

Hogwarts

Having been roused from his bed by Minchen, one of the school house-elves, an exhausted Remus hurried off to the Headmaster's office to discover Severus sitting behind the desk. "Where is Albus?"

"He suffered a stroke just before he was due to begin the Wizengamot meeting for Black's sentencing," Severus told him, revealing what Amelia had found out just as their interview had ended. "St. Mungo's don't believe he'll be ready to return here for at least a week."

Remus sat down in shock. "A stroke?"

"He had some bad news." Severus wanted to gloat at Remus' white face, but instead he arranged his face into a semblance of gravity. "Minerva was killed this morning."

"Why wasn't I woken?" Remus asked.

"There was a lockdown announcement made to the whole school, but you obviously slept through it," Severus informed him. "I would

have sent Minchen to inform you then, but your colleague, Professor Viking, said that given you would be unable to do anything to change what happened, perhaps we would be better to let you sleep off your illness." Severus leant forward. "Does she know what you are?"

"Yes." Remus was not surprised that Lucy had asked he be left to sleep, or that he had slept through the lockdown announcement. Remus had to admit that he could probably sleep through an earthquake for the few hours after his transformation. His throat feeling clogged, he returned to the subject of Minerva, asking, "How did it happen?"

Severus recited what had happened with Bellatrix and Minerva, altering the scenario slightly, just as he had done for Amelia. "I never expected Minerva to believe her and turn, so I wasn't quick enough to react." He looked down as he made his voice falter.

As had been the case since he started at Hogwarts, Remus could feel nothing from Severus. He quite rightly suspected that Severus was using an emotional dampening potion of some sort. But even so, Remus had no reason to believe that Severus would lie, and so Remus was taken in by Severus' act. "I'm sorry, Severus." Even though he was reeling, his thoughts turned to the Aurors who had been outside, although with only one hand, Remus doubted Bellatrix could have done much to them. "Did she manage to kill anyone else?"

"The Aurors on guard," Severus said, watching Remus pale even more. As much as he wanted to let the man suffer, he had, however, a part to play. "But thankfully Tonks survived, although barely. Like Albus, she is being treated in St. Mungo's."

Remus had to blink rapidly to stop the tears that were threatening as this final blow was piled on. "Has Harry been told?"

"An announcement about Albus and Minerva will be made later today," Severus said.

Remus scowled. "Minerva was his guardian. I believe Harry should be told in private, and not in a public announcement."

"Then you are free to tell him, Lupin," Severus told him.

Remus got to his feet, and his anger at Severus' cavalier attitude surfaced. "I would have thought that just for once you could have put your resentment of James behind you."

"I have," Severus lied. "But I have more important things to attend to right now than Potter. As I said though, you are free to inform him."

Remus turned on his heel to leave, only to stop when Severus called out to him. "Yes?"

"You will become the temporary head of Gryffindor." Severus had made the decision based upon what he knew Albus would have wanted, although it irked him to give his former schoolmate such a prestigious position.

"I will tell the Gryffindors about Minerva myself then," Remus said. "Like Harry, they also don't deserve to hear it in a school-wide announcement."

"Whatever makes you happy," Severus said. "Now, I have things to do." Severus bowed his head and started to write, ignoring Remus.

Remus angrily stalked out of the office. He decided that he would first tell Gryffindor, and then Harry.

Gryffindor House

Hermione was seated with George and her fellow Gryffindors when a disembodied voice asked that all Gryffindors go to the Common Room. Hermione was rather surprised to see Remus rather than Minerva, and after flashing the rather stern-faced professor a smile, she waited to hear what he had to say.

Remus took a deep breath. "I'm afraid that I have some terrible news for you all."

At once whispers began to circulate, and Remus held up his hand. "Please be quiet." The Common Room quieted almost immediately, and Remus continued. "There was an attack on the school this

morning, and..." Again the Gryffindors became unsettled, and again Remus was forced to ask them to be quiet.

"As I was saying," Remus said in a grave voice. "There was an attack, and I'm very sorry to have to tell you that Professor McGonagall was killed."

The whispers erupted into an uproar. Remus was unsurprised at this. Despite Minerva's sternness, she had been a kind and loyal leader of Gryffindor, and this was evident by the amount of tears that were already flowing, even from some of the boys.

As a crowd began to surround Remus to ask more questions, Hermione turned to George with tears running down her cheeks. "I need to find out if Harry knows."

"Do you need me to come with you?" George asked, his face pale.

"I don't think so," Hermione said, and she kissed George's cheek, before heading into the throng. Eventually, she got to the front and was able to ask, "Sir, does Harry know?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm going to tell him now."

"Can I come with you?" Hermione asked, wanting to be with her friend.

"Yes," Remus said, placing a hand on her shoulder, and making an announcement. "Can I have silence?"

Little by little, the questions ceased, and apart from the sounds of sobs, the room became silent, and Remus was able to speak. "I have been made temporary head of Gryffindor. My rooms are on the second floor, fourth door on the left from the Headmaster's office. I will not be available for the next few hours as I have to pass the news on to others, but after that, should anyone need me, feel free to come see me; even if it is in the middle of night."

The mention of the Headmaster made George realize something. "Why didn't the Headmaster tell us about Professor McGonagall?"

"The Headmaster has been taken unwell, and Professor Snape has stepped in to take his place," Remus announced.

After another barrage of questions, and some unsavory remarks about Severus, Remus had had enough. "SILENCE!"

Gryffindor fell silent. Remus stood with a frown on his face. "You have just learned that a beloved teacher is dead, and another is ill. Those of you who are complaining about Professor Snape should be ashamed."

Heads dropped as Remus' words were driven home, and a few heartfelt apologies were issued. Remus looked around Gryffindor. "That is more like it. If you will excuse me."

Then he turned and left, taking Hermione with him.

Hufflepuff House

Harry was lying on his bed reading when Remus entered the room. "Ernie, would you please excuse us?"

Ernie left immediately, spotting Hermione waiting in the corridor. "What are you doing in here?"

"She's with me," Remus said, as he stepped back out to call Hermione in.

Harry knew then that something was terribly wrong. Hermione's face was tearstained, and she barely looked as though she was holding it together. "Remus, what's happened?"

Justin could tell it was something bad when Hermione sat down by Harry, and took his hand. Justin therefore also moved to sit by his friend, taking Harry's other hand. Only then did Remus pass on the bad news. "I'm so very sorry, Harry, but Lestrangle turned up this morning, and she attacked Minerva. Unfortunately Minerva was killed."

Harry sat stunned. "How?"

Remus revealed what he had failed to tell the Gryffindors. "Lestrangle used the killing curse on her. Severus fired back but unfortunately he was far too late to save her."

"I bet he let her die," Harry said bitterly, tears starting to fall.

Unlike the Gryffindors, Remus did not berate Harry; instead he defended his colleague. "Severus did everything he could, and he killed Lestrage."

"How did she get into the school?" Harry asked, his voice sounding strangled as he tried to hold back the floodgate that was trying to overcome him.

"She didn't actually access the school," Remus said. "She attacked from outside the gates, taunting Minerva that Severus was going to attack her, and as Minerva turned, she killed her."

"But why would Professor McGonagall believe her?" Hermione asked, tears falling again as she held her shaking friend.

"This is something you could discover from old newspapers, so I am going to tell you, but I would prefer it if this is kept between us," Remus said. "Severus was a Death Eater."

Harry's face turned ugly. "And you believed his story?"

"He was also a spy for the Light," Remus had no idea that Severus had only pretended to become one to try and save Lily, "which is not something you will read in the newspapers."

"You mean he was a double agent?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Remus confirmed Justin's guess. "This is why Bellatrix believed he was on her side."

"It didn't save Aunt Minnie though," Harry said, his voice full of anger.

"No, it did not," Remus had to admit before he went on. "Lestrage's appearance also confirms that Harry's nightmare that You-Know-How tried to come back to have been true."

All three children looked surprised, Hermione asking, "How could you know that?"

"Lestrangle had only one hand." Remus was unsurprised to see the disgusted looks of the children. "And the failed ritual is backed up by Severus' statement that Lestrangle was apparently ranting about being betrayed, and her Master was gone. And Severus, as well as myself, believe that was why she came here: to find whoever had betrayed them."

"But she was going on about Neville in my dream," Harry reminded Remus, momentarily diverted from his grief.

Hermione shook her head. "Neville would never betray you to him, Harry."

"I wasn't saying that," Harry said, his face reddening. "I meant that maybe she was here to attack Neville, and not her betrayer, or perhaps both."

"Sorry," Hermione apologized.

Remus took up again. "You might be right, Harry. But with Lestrangle dead, we will never know."

Hermione made a good point. "At least we know one thing. If Lestrangle said that this ritual failed, then at least we know now that You-Know-Who is temporarily out of action."

Justin agreed with her. "Which is only good news."

Remus unfortunately was about to burst the bubble. "That is good news, but I'm afraid I have more bad news."

Harry swallowed hard. "What is it?"

"Tonks has been seriously hurt," Remus told him. "I don't know how badly yet, but I'm going to find out, and let you know." Remus let out a long breath, before going on. "And Albus has suffered a stroke after learning the news about Minerva."

This was all too much for Harry, and the floodgate that had threatened earlier now surfaced. Justin and Hermione wrapped their friend in their arms, rocking him, while Remus stood by. After a few moments, he knelt down, and touched Harry's knee. "Harry?"

Harry looked at him, but couldn't speak, and so Remus went on. "I'm going to St. Mungo's shortly, and I'll let you know what I find out as soon as I can. But I would like to take you home first. I've already sent a message to Cordie to expect you."

"I'm going with him," Justin announced in a firm voice, although he too was close to tears at the news about Tonks.

Remus had suspected as much, and he had therefore already accounted for Justin's demand. "I've already cleared it with Professor Sprout." He turned to Hermione. "And Hermione, as head of Gryffindor, I'm giving you permission to leave as well if you want to go."

"I do," Hermione sniffled, not letting go of Harry.

Remus decided it was time to go. "There are a lot of students in the Common Room, and so I therefore think we should take the back way."

"Back way?" Justin asked in surprise.

After sending Ernie back into his room, Remus led the group up the corridor, and after checking no-one else was around, he reached out to touch a stone inset of a badger on the wall, and said, "Loyalty above all else."

Harry would normally have been excited to learn something like this, but he was too upset to care at that moment, and he let Remus and his friends lead him up the corridor that appeared. After tapping the badger on the inside of the corridor, the entrance closed.

Headmaster's Office

Neville wondered why he had been summoned by Professor Snape, and he sat nervously on the edge of his seat. Severus said little for a few moments, letting Neville sweat, before beginning. "Mr. Longbottom, I do believe that you had something to do with LeStrange's appearance here."

"The Headmaster said she was after me," Neville said, trying to keep his voice steady and failing.

"She was," Severus confirmed, and he leant forward. "But what I know and nobody else does, is that you are the one who betrayed Lestrangle's master, and caused his resurrection to fail. Would you care to tell me how you managed to do that, Longbottom?"

Neville immediately denied it. "I don't know what you mean, Sir."

"Look at me," Severus demanded.

Neville did so, and he felt a slight pressure in his head. Memories of taking Harry's blood somehow found their way to the surface of his mind, and then all of a sudden the pressure was gone. Severus tutted. "Mr. Longbottom, I do believe you were told to take the blood forcibly."

Neville's eyes widened with shock. "How...?"

"I read your mind," Severus admitted. "So why did you help Lestrangle? If you lie to me, I'll invade your mind again, and this time it won't be so painless."

Neville started to cry. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies, Longbottom," Severus snapped. "I want an explanation."

In tears Neville began to explain why he had helped. "She wrote to me, and said that she knew that I had helped You-Know-Who in first year, and that I had promised to help him in exchange for restoring my parents."

"And you believed her?" Severus asked.

"She sent a vial containing a memory," Neville sobbed. "I put it in my father's pensieve when my Gran was out, and looked at it. And I did do exactly as she said I had done. When she sent the memory she also said that if I didn't help, she would send a copy to the Wizengamot."

Severus ignored Neville's sniveling, as he mused over what he had learned. "Do you still have the copy of the memory?"

"Yes, Sir," Neville admitted. "It's in my trunk."

Severus called out, and a house-elf was summoned to collect Neville's trunk. Once the memory was safely in Severus' hands, he pocketed it. "Now, Longbottom. I am not going to report this to the Wizengamot."

Neville sagged and began to cry harder with relief. "Thank you, Sir."

"I'm not finished," Severus said in a silky voice. "Did the Dark Lord keep his side of the bargain?"

Neville nodded and delving into his trunk, he pulled out the vial he had been sent. "I haven't used it though. Someone has to die to make it work."

Severus also pocketed this vial, and then went on to reveal his true colors. "And somebody will be dying."

Neville looked up. "But..."

"The next time you go to see her, you will administer this potion to your mother," Severus instructed.

"If I do that I'll die," Neville protested in fear, his tears starting full force again.

Severus needed Neville alive, and he therefore pondered over who would be the best person to use as the sacrifice. "Who will become your guardian should your grandmother die?"

As Severus' intention became clear to Neville, he offered up a refusal. "I won't kill her."

"You'll do exactly as I say," Severus warned. "Otherwise your body will be found at the bottom of Astronomy Tower together with a suicide note outlining your part in this."

Neville was by now terrified, and he blurted out. "My Mum's cousin, but she's a Muggle."

Severus was pleased with the answer. "She'll be easy to manipulate."

Neville had feared that Severus was going to kill her, and so he found himself taken aback at Severus' response. "Manipulate?"

"You have access to a small fortune, Longbottom," Severus made it clear what he wanted, "a small fortune that will be placed at my Master's disposal." Severus then moved on, deciding to make the most of Albus' absence. "I think there is no time like the present, so I am going to grant you leave of one week to recover from the shock of Lestranger's attack, and while you are off, you will ask to visit your mother in hospital, and give her this potion."

Neville started to cry again, but Severus was unrepentant. "Now before you go, you're going to swear an oath for me not to reveal what we have discussed. If you don't, we're going to make a little visit to the Astronomy Tower."

A sobbing Neville did as he was told. And two hours later he was home.

Two Days later

Neville sat white-faced in the hospital simply staring at his mother. His Gran had tried again and again to find out what was wrong, but Neville had refused to tell her. Now she had gone to speak to the healers to get an update on his parents, but Neville knew he was expected to stun her when she returned. Getting up, Neville kissed his mother's cheek. "Mum, I love you." He smiled at her as she offered him a bubble gum wrapper, which he pocketed.

Pulling the vial out of his pocket, Neville wanted to smash it against the wall, but he was aware that he would die if he broke the terms of his oath. Hearing his father stir, Neville moved over to his bed, and began to apologize to him. "Dad, I'm so sorry. I should never have offered to help him."

Frank Longbottom simply stared blankly at his son. As Neville looked back at the broken man before him, Neville felt horribly ashamed. He knew only too well from his grandmother what Frank

and Alice had gone through in order to protect him. And he also knew that Frank would never have bowed to Voldemort's or Severus' demands, and Neville's shame became tenfold. Hearing his grandmother's voice booming down the ward, Neville turned in panic. He then looked back at his father, and came to a brave decision. Uncorking the vial, he helped his father to drink it.

Augusta stepped into the curtained off area to find Neville wiping Frank's mouth. "Neville, what are you doing?"

Neville was in tears as he dropped the cloth and empty vial. However, he took hold of his father's hand, and turned to face his grandmother. "I'm so sorry, Gran. I have to do this."

Augusta looked in alarm at the vial. "What have you given him?"

"Restituo Potion," Neville said, sinking onto a chair but still clasping his father's hand as he felt himself growing weaker.

"Where did you get it?" August asked, totally aware of Neville's incompetence at brewing anything.

Neville swallowed hard, unable to reveal the truth in case he died too soon and the potion failed, but he hoped that his Gran would guess from his words. "From a very bad man; the worst man there is."

August paled. "You don't mean...?"

Neville began to struggle to stay conscious. "I'm sorry, Gran, really sorry."

August suddenly realized what was happening, and she yelled out. "I need help now."

"Love you," Neville uttered, and then he went completely still.

A healer came rushing in, and waved his wand over Neville. "He's gone."

"Do something!" Augusta demanded.

The healer spent the next five minutes trying everything he could to bring Neville back but in the end he shook his head. "His magical core is completely depleted; there was nothing I could do."

From behind them Frank suddenly groaned. "My head hurts. What happened? Where's Alice?"

Augusta knew she had some explaining to do.

BritAD – Three Days Later

Severus also found himself with some explaining to do as he was led into to a room to sit before a table at which sat Frank Longbottom, Augusta, and Amelia Bones. "Good morning."

"I can see you're confused, so let me explain," Amelia said by way of introduction as to why Severus had been pulled away from Hogwarts. "Mr. Longbottom has recently been brought back to full health by means of a potion; a potion we were hoping you could shed some light on."

"What is the potion?" Severus asked in a cool voice.

Augusta stared with hatred at the potions professor. "Neville called it Restituo potion, and, just before he died, he said that a very bad man gave it to him."

"My most sincere condolences on the loss of your grandson," Severus immediately did as was expected of him.

Augusta did not want Severus' condolences but protocol demanded she respond in kind. "Your condolences are most welcome."

Now that etiquette had been dealt with, Amelia brought the subject back to the potion. "So, Professor Snape, are you aware of such a potion?"

Severus pretended to consider what he had just learnt before answering. "There are many potions that have the word 'Restituo' as part of their name. But I know of only one that might have been able

to bring Mr. Longbottom back from his state of limbo, and it's called the Alienari Restituo potion."

"Are you capable of brewing this potion, Professor Snape?" Frank asked, his voice a little hesitant and harsh from not having used it for so long.

"Capable, yes," Severus responded, not about to lie about his competence. "But able to, no. Some of the ingredients in that potion would cost a great deal of money due to their rarity, if you could even find them in the first place."

"Would Lestrangle have been able to obtain these items?" Amelia asked.

Severus shrugged. "I have no idea."

Amelia had expected such an answer. "Then let me rephrase the question. If Lestrangle had had access to the ingredients, would she have been capable of brewing the potion?"

"You probably know as well as I do that Lestrangle took potions to NEWT level," Severus responded. "And if she had some guidance from someone else capable of brewing the Alienari potion, then yes, she could have done it."

"Did you help her?" Frank demanded to know.

Severus shook his head. "No, and I'm willing to swear an oath to that effect."

"Then I want one," Frank growled.

"Mr. Longbottom, Professor Snape is here to try and shed light on this potion, and not to be blamed for what happened," Amelia gently cautioned Frank. She did, however, think that he had a very good point. "But, for the sake of clearing your name from my investigations, would you be agreeable to making such an oath?"

"I would," Severus said, and he slowly withdrew his wand. "I, Severus Tobias Snape, do solemnly swear that I did not brew Alienari Restituo potion for Neville Longbottom, nor did I obtain such a potion for him."

Frank sagged in disappointment as Severus remained seated and very much alive. "Then it has to be true. He got it from him."

Although he knew exactly where Neville had obtained the potion from, Severus immediately jumped on Frank's final word. "Him?"

"We believe that Neville got in over his head, and somehow managed to obtain the potion from You-Know-Who," Amelia finally filled Severus in totally.

Severus had been wondering when Voldemort's name would come up. "I could imagine that he would easily have been able to brew the potion, or, if he was indisposed, he would have been able to instruct Lestrage. But I'm afraid that is all I can tell you."

Amelia made a note in her papers. "Then thank you again, Professor Snape. Before you leave, I'd be grateful if you could add your signature here."

Severus rose to his feet and did as he had been asked. "I've owed my copy of your report from the Lestrage incident to you yesterday."

"I received it, thank you," Amelia said, rising to her feet.

Severus turned to Frank, who was now once again head of the Longbottom family. "May I once again offer my most sincere condolences, and beg your permission to make an announcement to Hogwarts about Neville?"

Frank now had little choice but to allow that Severus had had nothing to do with his son's death. He therefore replied formally as Severus had made the request in such a manner. "Your condolences are most welcome, and your entreaty is granted." Frank rose unsteadily to his feet and bowed slightly. "Professor Snape, thank you for your time."

"You are most welcome, Mr. Longbottom," Severus said. And then, after bidding both Augusta and Amelia goodbye, he left the room.

Frank sagged down into his seat. "I was so sure he had had something to do with all of this, particularly after Augusta told me about Minerva."

"Auror Tonks confirmed that it was only Lestrage who attacked her," Amelia reminded the man. "I cannot hold Professor Snape responsible in that matter, nor this one."

Frank smiled tightly. "I suppose I should be thanking him."

"No-one expects that, Frank," Amelia said gently, and then she redirected the conversation to a different subject. "And now, have you given any thought to returning to your former position once you are fully recovered?"

"I suppose I'd have to take the tests again?" Frank asked, not expecting otherwise.

Amelia could not in all good conscience allow Frank back in after so long without a rigorous refresher course. "You would, but Auror Moody would be only too happy to put you through your paces when he has Mr. Potter in here in two weeks' time."

"Harry Potter?" Frank asked in surprise.

"You know what the prophecy says, Frank," Amelia said solemnly. "And I want that boy as ready as he can be to face up to You-Know-Who, and if that means bending the rules, then I'm going to bend the rules."

"Then how can I resist such an offer?" Frank said, quite curious to see how Harry had turned out. "Until then, Amelia."

Amelia relaxed her formal stance and hugged her former friend and colleague. "I'm so sorry about Neville, Frank."

"His funeral is later today," Frank said, choking up somewhat. "It is only going to be family and close friends, but I would be honored if you would attend."

Amelia had back to back meetings all day but she decided to cancel them. "I will be there."

23rd June 1995

Hedwig flew down to Hagrid. He scratched the white bird's breast. "I suppose yeh wants a snack."

Hedwig bumped her head against Hagrid, and smiling he let the bird into his hut.

Almost immediately, Nagini began frantically hissing, and Hagrid headed over to her cage. "Now what is up with yeh?"

Nagini hissed several times, trying to make herself understood. Attending to the snake, Hagrid failed to notice Hedwig fall dead onto his bed. As Nagini's hissing became more frenzied, Hagrid turned away to reach out for the mice he kept for her. "Yeh must be really hungry."

At that moment a mist glided behind him and dove into the cage. Hagrid turned back, having missed the merging of snake and mist. And upon opening the cage he was therefore taken unawares when Nagini struck out at him, pumping large amounts of venom into him. Grabbing his hand, Hagrid staggered backwards, and the snake fled out of the cage, and through the still open door.

Laurifer Manor

Tom stretched and pulled back the sheets. He so relished the feel and odor of the crisp cotton against his skin after so long in the diary. But his journey into sleep was to be interrupted when a hissing voice called out his name. Tom turned around and demanded in Parseltongue, "Show yourself!"

A large green hued snake slithered into sight. "It has been a long time since I gazed upon that face."

Tom automatically reached up and touched his cheek. "I beg your pardon."

"You don't recognize me, do you, Tom?" the snake hissed, making it almost sound like a laugh. "I'm you, Tom."

"Lord Voldemort?" Tom asked, but masked his surprise as he did so.

"Yes," the snake confirmed.

Tom wondered how Voldemort had tracked him down. "How did you find me?"

"Snape," Voldemort said simply.

Tom did not believe Severus would betray him, not even to the thing that had brought Tom into being. "Snape brought you here?"

"Of course not willingly," Voldemort responded disparagingly. "Snape is a traitorous bastard who only thinks of saving his own skin."

"I don't understand," Tom responded.

"He killed my most loyal servant to cover up his mess after killing that hag, McGonagall," Voldemort hissed. "I knew then that something was up, and so I made my way into Hogwarts. I first took over an owl and tried to follow Snape in his Animagus form a few nights' ago, but he simply changed back and apparated at the boundaries. So I found another way here. I was going to head into the Forest to find a snake to use, but I discovered this beauty to follow Snape."

"Exactly how?" Tom asked, intrigued as to how a snake would have fared any better, even though it obviously had.

"I sank my fangs into Snape's ankle just as he apparated out," Voldemort explained.

"And where is Snape?" Tom asked, wondering why his most trusted servant had not come to tell him what had transpired.

"He probably apparated back to Hogwarts to hurry to his potions rooms to search out the antivenin for the bite I gave him as he apparated here," Voldemort hissed in delight. "But he'll be too late; the amount of venom I pumped into him will overcome him before he reaches the school."

Tom shrugged. "I suppose I can always find another Potions Master."

The snake made a very strange sound, almost like a chortle, before getting down to the business. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"So that we can become one," Tom guessed, and then he lied. "I have had people out looking for you for just that reason, but they failed to discover any trace of you."

"Bellatrix Lestrange's husband's family sheltered us both," Voldemort hissed. "She was my most loyal servant, and it she who sacrificed part of herself to try to bring me back using a resurrection ritual. But this has failed, and so I have decided that we will need to merge instead."

Tom felt nauseated at the very idea, but he showed none of this on his face. "I'm afraid I need to look up the correct ritual for our merger."

"I know the ritual already," Voldemort informed him. "You will need to brew the Commisceo Animus potion. I doubt you will be familiar with it."

Tom had heard of it but that was all. "I'm not."

"Then I will give you an inventory of what you will need, and instructions on how to make it. Do you have a potions lab here?" Voldemort hissed.

"A very basic one," Tom said, lying.

"That will suffice," Voldemort decided, before stating, "The potion will take you one day to brew."

"Then I will start in the morning." Tom fully intended to get a good night's sleep.

"You will start now," Voldemort ordered. "I am fed up with inhabiting these creatures."

Tom wished he could simply destroy the snake but he was well aware that Voldemort would revert to his misty state, and Tom would

then have no idea of where the man was. "Very well, I'll start on it now."

After giving Tom instructions on how to brew the potion, Voldemort slithered over to the fireplace. "A fire would be welcome before you leave."

Tom aimed his wand at the fireplace, which was how he guessed Voldemort had managed to gain access into his room. "I will see you when the potion is complete."

"You will return after the first stage of the potion is complete, which should take about an hour." Snake Voldemort lifted its head for a moment, looking directly at Tom, before coiling up.

After walking into the large and spacious potions lab in the basement, Tom discovered Severus was not in Hogwarts, but had sensibly headed for Tom's own private lab, and was now brewing frantically. Tom walked over to him. "You've been bitten, haven't you?"

Severus was already feeling dizzy, and acknowledged he had. "Potter's snake sank its fangs into me just as I was apparating out. I tried to kill it when I arrived but Lucius was in the way. It's slithered off somewhere. Lucius is searching for it." Severus wobbled as he added fairy wings, the venom effectively doing its job.

Tom pushed him aside. "I will finish this."

Sweating, and getting more disorientated by the second, Severus let Tom finish the potion, and a short time later, after taking it, he started to feel like himself again. "Thank you, Tom."

"You are more than welcome, Severus," Tom said, and then let him in on the secret. "Lucius won't find the snake; it's in my rooms."

"You killed it?" Severus asked.

Tom shook his head. "I didn't dare take the chance. You see, the snake is Voldemort, and the reason he bit you was because he was searching for me."

"And I brought him exactly where he wanted to go," Severus said resignedly. "My humblest apologies."

"On reflection you may have done me a favor," Tom informed Severus. "Voldemort wants me to make the Commisceo Animus potion."

Aware of what the potion did, and although he was surprised that Tom seemed to want to go ahead with the merger, Severus immediately offered to make it. "I am completely recovered now, and would be happy to brew it for you."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not going to merge with that thing. I'm going to make the Laqueum Animus potion instead."

Aware of the potion's abilities, Severus guessed at what Tom planned. "You're going to trap the Dark Lord's soul somehow?"

Tom smiled in acknowledgement. "I thought in a book would be most fitting. I would ask you to make it but you would be betraying your former master if you did so."

As part of Voldemort's former Inner Circle, Severus' oath was far more reaching than a standard Death Eater's oath, and he was well aware that if he betrayed Voldemort by making the potion for Tom, it might kill him. "But as you are part of him, I would still be serving you."

"I don't think we should take the chance, Severus," Tom said as he began to move swiftly around the potions lab putting together what he needed. An hour later he straightened up. "I have to return."

When Tom entered the bedroom, the snake glanced at the gold clock on the mantelpiece. "You are at stage one. What color is the potion?"

Tom relayed what he had looked up. "An opaque silvery-blue with silvery flecks."

"Excellent!" Voldemort hissed. "Soon I will be free of this non-existence, and I will then take my revenge on Potter."

"What happened that night with Potter?" Tom asked, only aware of what happened up to a certain point from Severus.

"Lily Potter was cleverer than I anticipated. Her sacrifice activated a spell she had placed around her children, and it rebounded onto me," Voldemort's hissing was full of anger. "Stupid girl. She should have stood aside, leaving me to ascend to my destiny."

Tom decided his creator was full of pride; a path he did not intend to take, fully intending to learn from Voldemort's mistakes. "Why would you even let her live?"

"She was once Severus' lover, and as he had always been a loyal servant, I agreed that if she did not offer up any resistance, then she could live." Voldemort had never understood Severus' obsession with the redhead. "I should have just stunned her."

Tom agreed, but did not say so. "Do you know what spell she used?"

"No, but I would guess at the Exanimus sacrificial spell," Voldemort told his counterpart.

Tom knew that the spell would only save one, as it worked by taking one life to save another. "She must have known that only one child would survive."

Voldemort had intended to kill both of Lily's children that night. "I think she must have preferred that to losing both."

"So was it painful?" Tom asked, when a silence fell.

"Extremely," Voldemort nodded his head, his scales glistening in the firelight. "Every atom in my body felt as though it was being torn out one by one, and I ended up in a gaseous state. I existed in the material world by taking over small animals' bodies but they don't last long. After Quirrell's demise, Bellatrix found me, and through several rituals she managed to fashion a permanent body for me to inhabit. Unfortunately the resurrection ritual to restore me into a true body went wrong. I suspect now that Longbottom did not follow my instructions."

"Snape told me that Longbottom helped you because you offered to restore his parents to good health," Tom said, revealing he knew more than perhaps Voldemort had guessed.

Voldemort would have scowled if he could have. "The little bastard double-crossed me, and I will be taking my revenge on him once I am myself again."

Tom realized that somehow Voldemort did not know what had happened to Neville. "That won't be possible."

"What do you mean?" Voldemort hissed in annoyance.

"Longbottom killed himself rather than succumbing to Severus' demands," Tom revealed.

"So he wasn't quite as spineless as I imagined," Voldemort hissed in an offhand fashion, before changing the subject. "I want to see the potion."

"Of course," Tom said, guessing correctly that Voldemort did not entirely trust him. Leading the way down the stairs, Tom let Voldemort follow him, before opening the door to his potions lab. As the snake slithered in front of him, Tom stunned it.

When Voldemort came to, it was to find himself trapped in a cage. "What is the meaning of this?"

Tom placed a book next to the cage. "Did you really think that I would merge with you?"

"You are vulnerable without me," Voldemort pointed out. "You are only a piece of my soul, and should you die then it is final."

"Rather than merge with you," Tom said, his voice revealing his disgust. "How we might look after such a merger repulses me."

"I only looked like that because of splitting my soul so many times," Voldemort hissed at Tom. "And if I had not done so, you would not be here."

"No, I would not," Tom admitted. "But I fully intend to make the most of the opportunity that has been given to me."

"I could help you achieve what you seek," Voldemort tried bargaining with Tom.

Tom had expected such a plea, and he ignored it. "You can offer me nothing that would induce me to merge with you. Obviously I can't kill you, but I am going to make sure that you can give me no trouble."

Voldemort did not betray his fear of what Tom might do, merely asking, "So you're going to put me on ice?"

"Not exactly how I would have phrased it, but yes," Tom said, picking up the leather bound book he had fetched from his library, and showing it to Voldemort. "This will be your new home. I thought it quite apt."

As he read the title, despite his predicament, Voldemort could not help but be tickled by Tom's irony. "The Lair of the White Worm. Quite droll."

"I thought so." Tom picked up a vial of potion, and threw its contents into the cage. "This will separate you from the snake."

Inside Nagini, Voldemort steeled himself as he was ripped forcibly from his vessel. Trying to flee through the bars of the cage, he found himself unable to do so, and he was forced to listen as Tom picked up a second vial of potion.

"This potion will imbue the book with absorptive qualities. When I slide it in through the bars, your essence will be drawn inside." Tom poured the potion over the book, watching as it glowed pink before resuming its original brown color. "Then I am going to place this book in the library here in Laurifer Manor."

Voldemort felt himself being sucked inside the book as it was placed inside the cage. Within moments it was over, and he was bound inside. He soon began to feel sleepy, and just as Tom had slept in a dormant fashion in the diary without any life force to feed him, Voldemort too would eventually reach the same state.

Tom whistled jauntily to himself as he made his way upstairs and into library. Smiling, he slid the book back into the spot he had

originally taken it from. He knew that none of the Death Eaters would ever want to read Muggle books, and the library was his private domain. Voldemort would therefore remain in the book forever, and once he had the Hallows, he, Tom, would be the one to go onto rule the wizarding world.

When Tom returned to the potions lab he found Severus cleaning up. "Thank you."

"It is the least I can do," Severus said, grateful for Tom's help in saving him. He was well aware that Voldemort had intended for him to die.

Suddenly a faint hiss caught Tom's attention, and he span around. "I thought you were dead."

"Help," Nagini hissed weakly.

Tom moved around the lab, and soon Nagini was being drip fed a mixture of a strengthening potion and water onto her tongue. "You are a very strong snake to have survived. What is your name?" Severus only ever called the snake 'Potter's snake'.

"Nagini," Nagini hissed. "I belong to Harry Potter."

Tom thought the snake was far too beautiful and strong to be wasted on Harry, and he decided that he wanted her for himself. He therefore set out to inveigle his way into the snake's affections by planting doubts in her mind. "Is this the same Harry Potter who can speak Parseltongue and who attends Hogwarts?" When Nagini confirmed it was, Tom went on. "In that case, do you know of Shakira?"

"Shakira?" Nagini hissed.

"My Basilisk," Tom said. "She disappeared from beneath Hogwarts."

"Shakira was your Basilisk?" Nagini asked in surprise.

"Was?" Tom questioned, although he already knew of Shakira's demise from Severus.

Nagini's head dropped. "Harry killed her. He said she was going to kill him."

"He was lying," Tom said softly. "Shakira would have obeyed another Parselmouth."

"Why would he lie?" Nagini questioned Tom.

"Basilisks are worth a lot of money to wizards, mostly as ingredient potions," Tom said. "Does Harry take potions?"

Nagini acknowledged he did with a gentle hiss before protesting, "But Harry would not lie to me."

"He probably didn't want to hurt your feelings," Tom said slyly. "Or perhaps he eventually intended the same fate for you once you were fully grown."

Harry had not been to see Nagini as much as he once did, and Nagini found herself beginning to doubt what Harry had said about being her friend. But she also began to feel very distrustful of Tom's motives as well. "You are a two-legged snake speaker as well. Will you use me for potions?"

"I'm the person who saved you from the one who had taken over your body," Tom told her. "And if I had wanted to use you for potions, I would not have bothered." Tom sweetened the deal as the snake was prevaricating. "But I will send you back to Harry if you so wish."

Nagini was a simple snake, and after her recent experience she was also rather unnerved. "Will Harry be able to protect me from the one who hurt me if he attacks me again?"

Tom hissed his next question softly. "Did Harry protect you this time?"

Nagini had to admit to herself that Harry had not, and she was terrified of being taken over again. "And you could protect me?"

"Soon you will be big enough to protect yourself," Tom said lightly. "But in the meantime, if you agree to become my servant, then yes, I will keep you with me and protect you."

Nagini thought over Tom's offer, and her fear of being possessed again swayed her decision. "Then I am your servant."

"Go to sleep now," Tom hissed. "We will speak again in the morning."

Severus had remained silent during the conversation. "What were you talking to that thing about?"

"Potter. I'm on my way to convincing her that he is the devil, and I'm her savior," Tom said, smiling with delight. "When she's fully grown she will be quite a snake to be reckoned with, and I also need somewhere to store the ring."

"You're going to get her to swallow it?" Severus asked.

Tom shook his head. "She's going to join with it. Once the Horcrux in it feeds on her essence, it won't be enough to bring out the soul inside as happened with Lockhart and the diary, but it will be enough to turn her. She'll become mine completely, and I will send her back to Potter with a tale of woe."

"I'm not sure he'll believe her," Severus warned him. "That thing bit and nearly killed Hagrid, and Potter is rather fond of the great oaf."

"He'll believe her," Tom said. "And if not, we'll be placing her in Potter's path during the Triwizard Tournament."

"Triwizard Tournament?" Severus questioned Tom.

"Lucius told me that your Headmaster petitioned for it to be held next year at Hogwarts," Tom revealed, "providing that Lestrage was out of the picture." He smirked. "And thanks to you, she is."

"There's no way Dumbledore will let Potter take part," Severus pointed out.

"He won't have any choice in the matter," Tom informed him. "The rules state quite clearly that if your name comes out of the Goblet you are magically bound to compete, and you are going to enter Potter's name under a different school to make sure he takes part."

Severus was not as familiar with the Tournament as Tom, but even he knew that it involved only three contestants. "But that would mean that there will be four Champions."

"I don't care if there are ten," Tom said forcefully. "I want to see Potter in that Tournament, and I want him dead by the end of it!"

Next Chapter: Sirius' execution date is decided upon; Albus makes Remus an offer he doesn't want to refuse; Harry and Hermione have a tough decision to make.

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Chapter 50: Innocence Discovered

Hogwarts – June 30th 1995

Albus recovered and waited for Remus to arrive in his office. When he sat down, Albus passed on what had been decided in the scheduled meeting of the Wizengamot that had been held that morning. "I have news about Black. His execution will take place tomorrow at midday."

Remus had expected this but it still made his stomach go over with nerves. "Thank you for letting me know."

Albus then held out a piece of paper. "While I was at BritAD, I also got the results of the check that Amelia ran on Thomas Seville for me before I was taken ill. Seville isn't a billionaire, but he is extremely rich and a Muggleborn to boot. Although he's a wizard, he is, however, quite well-known in Muggle quarters due to his business dealings in the Muggle world." Albus also handed over a Muggle newspaper, which showed an extremely handsome, dark-haired man with his arm around a famous Muggle model.

"So that's where Petunia got his name from," Remus surmised. "The Muggle newspapers."

"I think so," Albus said, agreeing with Remus' hypothesis. "Amelia also checked into his business dealings, and, as the Muggles say, he's as clean as a whistle."

Remus had not expected the man to be some sort of crook. "And what did she say about the Four Pillars?"

"After finding out about Seville, like me, she believes them to be nothing but a fairytale," Albus said. "But to make sure, she put feelers out about the ruby and the cartouches, but she got nothing back."

"And the Verto Corpus?" Remus asked.

"Now that apparently does exist, although it was lost centuries ago, and no-one knows where it is now," Albus had to admit. "And no, I

have no idea from where Petunia came up with the knowledge of it. I can only think that Lily must have discovered something about it in a book, and Petunia saw it."

Remus found he was rather unsettled by this news. "And it does what she said it did, swaps souls?"

"Yes," Albus confirmed. "But even given that, Amelia really does not think that it is worth pursuing, and she has therefore closed the case."

"But Petunia died when she said she would," Remus reminded Albus. "And with this Verto Corpus being real, I think we should pursue it."

"It's just a sad coincidence," Albus said, disagreeing with Remus. "And just as Amelia has done, we too should consider this matter at end."

Remus felt differently but he could feel Albus' reluctance to continue discussing it, and so he therefore dropped the subject. "Of course."

Satisfied, Albus returned to the subject of Sirius. "Amelia has also said that if you want to attend tomorrow, you are welcome to do so. I should warn you that since I will be representing the Wizengamot, Severus will be attending as Hogwarts' representative and witness. We also discussed whether Harry should be allowed to attend but we both don't believe that it would be in Harry's best interests to go, given his reaction to Black last time."

Remus was only too well aware of how much Severus would enjoy seeing Sirius die, but he refrained from saying anything about him. "I agree about Harry, and I want to go so that I know that it's finally over, to be able to see that he's gone."

"Most of the execution will be carried out behind a screen," Albus warned Remus, not wanting him to think that he would be witnessing it in its entirety. "But you will see Black as he is brought into the Death Chamber." Then he leaned forward, his face full of concern. "I can understand why you wish to attend. But are you sure you can deal with this, Remus?"

"I don't know," Remus had to admit, his still flapping stomach going over again. "Normally I would ask Cordelia to support me at a time like this, but she has Dudley to take care of, and I don't want to expose him to an execution, even if Black did kill his mother."

"Is there someone else you would like to attend with you?" Albus asked, deciding that Remus would do well to take support with him.

Remus thought for a moment, and then he nodded. "If she agrees, I would like Lucy Viking to attend."

"I'll arrange for her to get security clearance," Albus said, making a note. "But if you change your mind, I'll understand."

"I won't," Remus said firmly.

Deciding there was nothing more to be said about Sirius, Albus moved on to his next point of business. "I have spoken to Cornelius Fudge about the new appointments I wish to make next year, and I was hoping you would consider remaining."

Remus shook his head. "We both know the Defense position is cursed."

Albus had no intention of offering Remus the same position, and revealed what he had planned. "I was actually hoping you would agree to step into Professor Binns' shoes and take over History of Magic."

"What will happen to Cuthbert?" Remus asked, concerned for the welfare of the professor even though he was a ghost.

"I have been allowing my friendship with him to taint how I deal with his ghostly problem," Albus owned, his demeanor more than a little embarrassed. "He should have passed over years ago, and I'm going to talk to him at the end of term about so doing."

Remus was not sure he liked the sound of that. "Why now? Is it because you want to keep me here?"

"I admit I do want to keep you here, but my request doesn't stem from that. Cornelius pointed out to me in our meeting that Hogwarts has the worst record out of all the magical schools in the world for

exam results in History of Magic." Albus had felt ashamed beyond belief at Hogwarts' poor showing. "I've always prided myself on having one of the best schools possible, but in this area I've failed. I have allowed myself to be blinded by concern for Cuthbert, and I have neglected our students, and that is why it has to change."

Remus accepted this answer. "Thank you for clarifying that. But I will have to think about it; I have Cordie and the children to consider now."

Albus went on. "Then perhaps I should finish what I intended to say. I not only wish you to take up the post of our History professor, but I would also like you to take over as the permanent head of Gryffindor, and to also accept the position of Deputy Head."

Remus brought up what he considered to be a major stumbling block. "But what about Severus?"

"He has made it more than clear on more than one occasion that he has no love for teaching," Albus said. "He teaches here only because he feels he has to."

Remus found Albus' comment rather perplexing. "I don't understand."

"You don't need to," Albus answered, not willing to discuss Severus' reasons with anyone other than Severus. "But I would like you to understand that the reason I've chosen you over everyone else is that the children like you, you like them, and you love teaching."

"What about Filius?" Remus asked.

"He is already considering retiring in a few years as is Pomona," Albus revealed. "And I need someone who is willing to take the position on a long term basis, and I believe you might be that person."

"But there are still others who could take that spot, such as Aurora or Septima." Remus brought up the names of some of the somewhat younger teachers who taught at Hogwarts.

Albus revealed what he had already done. "I have spoken to them both. In fact I've spoken to every teacher here except for Severus,

for obvious reasons, and all of them have stated that they do not wish to take up the position, but that they support my decision in wishing to ask you."

Remus was rather flattered, and it was definitely a position he would love to accept. However, he knew that it was no longer his decision alone to make. "As I said, I have to take Cordie's wishes into consideration."

"If it is spending time apart from Ms. Graham that is a concern, I will arrange for you to have married quarters," Albus hurriedly offered, as he sensed Remus wavering. "And we can sort something out for Dudley Dursley. If necessary I will tie him into the wards so that he is able to portkey in and out of Hogwarts to school."

"Would you allow me to think about it?" Remus asked, even though every fiber of his being was being tempted to scream out 'yes' there and then.

"I have to get my decision to Cornelius within two weeks when I submit the other professors' names who will be teaching next year." Albus passed on what Cornelius had decreed.

Remus was now curious about who else would be on staff. "So who do you have in mind for the vacant positions?"

Albus would have discussed these appointments with Remus before making them if Remus had been the deputy head, and believing he would ultimately take the position, Albus had no problem revealing what he had put into place. "I have already approached Auror Tonks, and she has agreed to take the Defense position, at least for one year."

Remus had major issues with appointing Tonks, who would never be able to return to full active duty. "And what happens to her after that time?"

"I have every intention of creating a position for her, such as dueling teacher, or something similar, after her term as Defense teacher ends," Albus said, also having considered what losing her job after a year might do to Tonks' morale.

"And she was amenable to this?" Remus asked.

"Very much so," Albus told him, before going on to plead his case. "This is why I want you on my staff as deputy head. You care about others in a way that some teachers would not do so."

Remus knew without saying that Albus was talking about Severus. "You're very kind to say so." He then enquired about Minerva's old spot. "And who do you have in mind for Transfiguration?"

Albus had thought long and hard about the position, and after sifting through several applications, he had offered it to the one person who had not applied for the job. "I've offered it on a permanent basis to Professor Viking. And although she is not exactly qualified to teach it up to 7th year level yet, she is going to be taking a night class at Oxford Wizarding University to make up for that lack. And I will step in to teach where necessary until she qualifies fully."

Remus believed that Lucy was the perfect choice, with most of the pupils, including quite a few from Slytherin, liking the girl. "I'm sure she'll do well."

"As would you if you accepted my offer," Albus said slyly.

As much as he wanted the position, Remus was not going to be browbeaten into taking it. "And as I have already said, I will need to speak to Cordie about it before I do so."

Albus therefore came up with a suggestion. "Why don't you go home tonight? It's Friday, and you could spend some time with her."

Remus refused the offer. "I can't. I have a detention scheduled with all of the Gryffindor first years that Severus set."

"I will cover it," Albus immediately offered. "I think getting an answer to my question would make it worth my while, and I could also give the Gryffindors a bit of treat."

Remus smiled at Albus' cheeky grin, but he still refused to be pressured. "I will take up your offer to talk to Cordie about your proposal. But I'm still not sure I'll have an answer by the time I return."

Albus smiled back, already believing he now had this in the bag. "I'll see you in the morning, Remus. And I'll speak to Professor Viking about tomorrow."

Again Remus refused an offer. "I'd rather do it myself, but I will send her up to speak to you about gaining security clearance." Getting up, he shook hands with Albus and left to seek out Lucy.

Potter Place

Cordelia was not exactly thrilled when Remus began explaining. "I thought you said you were going to give up teaching there, and what about Dudley?"

"You haven't let me finish," Remus said, although he was far from surprised at Cordelia's lack of enthusiasm. "Albus has offered me married quarters so that you could live with me, and he has also agreed to allow Dudley to portkey back and forth to school."

Cordelia now found herself having to reconsider her reluctance. "That would certainly make a difference, but I have another problem. What about the fact that Dudley and I are squibs?"

Remus had already anticipated this question. "Hogwarts is set up in a similar fashion to Potter Place. But I can ask Albus to arrange for standard taps and the like should you require it."

Cordelia had no problem using the touch plates, although she knew that Dudley was not always so keen. "It's good practice for Dudley to use his training wand, and I doubt he'd want to stand out from everyone else."

"I should imagine not," Remus said, and he took Cordelia's hand. "There's more. Albus has offered me the Deputy Head's position."

This news truly shocked Cordelia. "But I thought that Snape would take the position. He took over when Minerva McGonagall was killed."

Remus quickly set her straight. "That was because it was an emergency. Albus has assured me that Severus would not want the job, and the remaining staff would support me in the role."

Cordelia knew only too well about the antipathy between Remus and Severus. "And do you think Snape would?"

"I doubt he'd be thrilled about it," Remus answered honestly. "But I believe he would accept it if he had to."

Cordelia could tell that Remus wanted the job. "You really would love the job, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Remus answered passionately. "But while I do love teaching I love you more, and if you don't want me to take this, then I won't."

Cordelia was unwilling to be responsible for stealing away Remus' dreams, even though they were not her own. "Remus, I know how much having a job means to you, and particularly a job you love. If we can sort out the logistical issues, then I'm happy for you to take the job."

"Are you entirely sure about this?" Remus asked, still able to detect some reluctance coming from his fiancée. "I meant it when I said I'd choose you over my career."

"I know you did, but there's more than me to consider. I would also like to ask Dudley for his opinion," Cordelia said, not wanting to take away the home that Dudley had gotten used to living in without consulting the boy first.

Remus agreed with her. "Then let's bring him in on the conversation."

Dudley, unlike Cordelia, sat quietly until Remus had finished explaining. "So I'd really get to live in Hogwarts?"

Remus could feel both nerves and excitement coming from Dudley, and he hoped his answer to Dudley's question would not change that. "During term time, yes."

"Where would I sleep?" Dudley asked a question no-one had considered.

"I can arrange for a room for you," Remus said, aware that Hogwarts had plenty of spare bedrooms that could be utilized for Dudley. "Unfortunately we can't place you in any of the Houses as you're not a pupil there."

Dudley was a little disenchanted to learn that but his delight in discovering that he was going to live in Hogwarts overrode his disappointment. "Will I be able to watch the quid matches?"

"It's quidditch, and yes," Remus said, now aware that Dudley was going to say yes.

Dudley did. "Then it's okay with me." As his stomach growled, he changed the subject. "Is dinner ready yet?"

"I haven't started it," Cordelia said apologetically.

"We should go out and eat," Remus decided, wanting to give Cordelia and Dudley a treat for supporting him. He smiled at Dudley. "Get changed into something smart. I think we should celebrate."

"We're going to a posh place?" Dudley asked in surprise, his expeditions out so far only running to Chinese food and pizza.

"I think we are," Remus said, his mind now firmly made up. "Off you go."

Although Remus seemed upbeat throughout the meal at the up-market restaurant that Cordelia had chosen, Cordelia could tell something was bothering him. Once they were home, and after Dudley had gone to bed, she called him on it. "What's wrong, Remus? And don't say nothing."

Remus had hoped to avoid telling Cordelia until it was all over but he was not about to lie now that she had noticed that he was not himself. "Black's execution is tomorrow, and I'm going."

"Are you sure?" Cordelia, like Albus, wondered if it was the best plan.

Remus had asked himself several times if it was a good idea but in the end he had decided that good idea or not, he had to go. "I don't want to go, but I need to do this."

Cordelia guessed why. "You want closure, don't you?"

Remus nodded. "Yes. Lucy is going to come with me."

"I would have gone," Cordelia said, a little hurt that Remus had not asked her.

"Dudley needs you here," Remus pointed out the obvious. "And I'm not sure I want to subject you to something like that."

"But you're doing it to Lucy," Cordelia countered.

"Lucy didn't lose her husband because of this man," Remus said, bringing up Edmund. "You did."

Cordelia went silent for a few moments while she considered what Remus was saying. "Even though I didn't love him, losing Edmund as I did was quite horrific." She took Remus' hands. "But what Black has done to you is far worse. Are you really sure you should be attending?"

"No, but I'm going anyway," Remus responded resolutely, and he gave his fiancée a gentle smile. "And right now I really don't want to talk about Black. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration, and I don't want what's left of it spoiled by thoughts of him."

"Then we'll put him on the backburner," Cordelia said, going along with Remus' wishes. She gave an impish smile. "Maybe you might like to spend the night."

Remus shook his head as his thoughts returned to Sirius. "With the way I feel right now, it wouldn't be about you."

Her smile vanishing, Cordelia placed a hand on Remus' face, her look becoming tender and caring. "I wouldn't mind, Remus."

"I would," Remus said firmly. "I want our first time to be about us, and not about me seeking comfort from you."

Cordelia cursed Sirius' existence in her head, and she slapped on a smile. "Then we'll wait a little longer."

Remus could feel Cordelia's disappointment, but he was not going to change his mind. He decided he would be better off going back to school rather than staying overnight as he had originally planned. "I'd better be off." He quickly kissed Cordelia, not wanting to give into his body's demands to seek the comfort he so badly needed. Then he stepped away. "I'll see you on Wednesday."

"Wednesday," Cordelia echoed dismally, before turning away as he vanished, and heading into the kitchen to prepare a hot water bottle, even though it was quite warm outside. If she couldn't have Remus, then she needed something warm and comforting in bed with her to take his place.

The Next Day

The blue eyed and dark-haired man glanced up when a smartly dressed house-elf appeared and bowed low before him. "Master Dae, I have news."

Dae Venant put down his newspaper. "What is it?"

"The network is talking about a house-elf who is searching for the Boy Who Lived. The Hogwarts elves have stopped him from using his magic to gain access to the school, but it is still trying to get in." This house-elf sounded nothing like his peers, and instead of badly spoken and excitable bursts of speech, he spoke in well-formed sentences.

"Can you intercept it?" Dae asked urgently. "If it's one of the Dark Lord's, it can't be allowed to reach the boy."

"I will do so immediately." French recognized the urgency in his Master's voice, and he therefore bowed low and vanished.

It was almost an hour later though when a bedraggled house-elf was hauled in front of Dae. Dae examined him but could find no identifying house mark. "Who do you belong to?"

French had already interrogated the house-elf. "He won't say, or, as is more likely the case, he can't, Sir."

Dae moved on, taking his house-elf's word as read. "Why are you seeking the Boy Who Lived?"

The house-elf said nothing, and Dae decided to try a different tack. "If it is to help him, then I am on your side."

The house-elf looked disparagingly at Dae. "You have bad mark. You are a bad man."

French took umbrage to the house-elf's accusation, and he slapped it around the back of the head. "Do not dare talk about Master Dae in such a way. He is a good person."

The house-elf glared at Dae before turning to French. "You make the solemn pledge?"

Not bothering to wait for Dae's say-so, French nodded, and gave the house-elf pledge, "I swear that I am a good house-elf, and I will have to accept clothes from my Master if I lie. And then I die."

The house-elf must have been satisfied because it turned to Dae, and began talking. "I have news for the great Harry Potter, Sir. Sirius Black is a good man. The bad man made him hurt the great Harry Potter's families and friends."

"Is he telling the truth?" Dae asked French tersely.

"Do you swear on this?" French asked the house-elf.

The unknown house-elf swore the same pledge French had, and then announced, "I have no clothes and lives, so I tell the truth."

"What is your name?" Dae asked again.

"I is Dobby," Dobby introduced himself.

Dae didn't recognize the name, but he was aware that most wizards did not regard their house-elves as worthy of a name, let alone made them public. "Who sent you, Dobby?"

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Dae, Sir," Dobby said in apologetic voice, unwilling to reveal who had asked him to find Harry.

Dae was not surprised, and he brushed a hand over his small goatee as he pondered what he had just learnt. "I have to admit, I thought the stories about Sirius were true, but it looks as though I might have jumped to an incorrect conclusion."

Dobby interrupted Dae's musing. "Excuse, Mr. Dae, but Sirius Black is to be murdered."

"Murdered?" Dae frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He means slain, Sir," French said quite unnecessarily.

Dae paled. "I think he actually means executed." He addressed Dobby in an urgent voice. "Do you know when?"

"After lunch," Dobby announced.

"Fuck!" Dae shot to his feet. "French, contact the house-elves at Hogwarts. Tell them you need to see Harry Potter, and pass on the message."

French bowed low. "Dobby, you may return to your house. We will deal with this now."

"Yes, Mr. French." Dobby was a little more than over-awed by the well-spoken house-elf, and hastened to obey.

Both house-elves then vanished, leaving Dae behind.

Hogwarts

The exams for all years except for fifth and seventh, and Hermione's backdated ones, had been cancelled because of Minerva's death and Albus' illness. Harry was therefore sitting at the back of the library looking out of the window, daydreaming instead of dealing with the small amount of homework he had to finish before school finished in five days' time. Suddenly a well-dressed house-elf he didn't recognize appeared in front of him. "Does the Headmaster want to see me?"

"Are you Harry Potter?" the house-elf asked in a polite voice.

"I am, but who are you?" Harry pulled out his wand as he realized the clothing wasn't the standard Hogwarts issue.

"I mean you no harm," the house-elf said quickly, but not passing on his name. "I have important news."

"Tell me then," Harry demanded, still not lowering his wand.

"Sirius Black has not committed the crimes you believe he has." French worded it in a far more eloquent way than Dobby would have, and far more quickly.

"He was caught red-handed by the Headmaster, and admitted to killing my Aunt," Harry said, now more convinced than ever that this house-elf was a danger to him.

"Mr. Black was forced to carry out these deeds by someone else," French told him. "And he's about to be executed for something he hasn't done."

"Why should I believe you?" Harry asked.

French uttered the same pledge he had given Dobby. "It is in your hands now." He then vanished.

Harry jumped at a sound from behind him, and he turned his wand on Luna, who had come out from behind the stacks. "Sorry, you startled me."

"What was he talking about?" Luna's voice was somewhat strangled.

"Some crap about Black not having done what we know he has," Harry said and he sat back down again.

However, Luna didn't move, and her face was pale. "Harry, a house-elf only gives a pledge like that if it is telling the truth."

Harry snorted. "Big deal. It could have been Black's house-elf and was making that up."

Luna knew differently. "Harry, under normal circumstances gaining clothes is the most awful thing that could happen to a house-elf as far as it is concerned. And the pledge that house-elf gave to you was

far worse than that. There was no way that that house-elf was lying. If it had been, a piece of clothing would have appeared in its hand, and it would have died."

Harry was still far from convinced. "How do you know that this house-elf wasn't told this mumbo jumbo about Black by another house-elf, maybe Black's own house-elf in an effort to try and save him? Then the house-elf who came here would have no idea about the truth, and would simply be doing as it was told."

"Because the same rule applies," Luna said agitatedly. "If a house-elf told a lie and made the pledge, even if it didn't know it was a lie, it would still receive clothing, and it would die. The house-elf who came here received no clothing, and he's still alive, so logic dictates that he must be telling the truth."

Harry slowly rose to his feet, dismay written all over his face. "You can't seriously mean that if someone told a lie, and then asked a house-elf to deliver it and make a pledge to say it was true, it would really die."

"I'm totally serious," Luna said, her anxiety written all over her face. "Harry, I know you don't want to believe it, but Sirius Black might be innocent, and we have to do something to help him if he is."

"We can hardly storm the Ministry," Harry pointed out a little sarcastically, still reluctant to help despite Luna's assertions.

"But we can tell Professor Dumbledore," Luna decided, ignoring Harry's unenthusiastic attitude. "Come on. He'll know what to do."

Albus was sitting in his office with Lucy, a rather happy looking Severus, and a strained looking Remus when Luna burst in without knocking, Harry trailing behind her. "I hope your unwarranted intrusion is something serious, Miss Graham-Lovegood."

Luna assured him it was. "It is, Sir."

"Then what is it?" Albus asked.

Although he thought it a waste of time, Harry didn't want to talk in front of Severus. "It's a personal matter, Sir, and so I wonder if we could talk alone."

"Of course," Albus said, Luna's face if nothing else convincing him it was urgent. "If the three of you would excuse us, we can continue this conversation later."

Severus rose to his feet. "Headmaster."

Remus and Lucy went to follow him, only for Luna to call out. "Professor Lupin, you can stay, and you too, Professor Viking."

Still going down the stairway, Severus caught Luna's offer, and he rolled his eyes, before continuing on his way muttering about Harry, his friends, and amateur dramatics under his breath.

Harry closed the door, before turning around, and resignedly saying, "I was in the..."

"Sirius Black might be innocent," Luna blurted out, interrupting Harry's more restrained approach. "You have to stop the execution."

Albus' face registered his surprise. "How did you know about that?"

The pair explained what they had been told, and Harry's tone was rather disparaging as he said, "Luna told me that a house-elf can't make the pledge without deadly consequences."

"She's absolutely right, Harry," Albus confirmed as he rubbed his beard.

Harry had only half-believed his friend but hearing the Headmaster confirm it was true shed a totally different light on things. "You mean Black might really be innocent?"

"Yes," Albus said simply.

Remus dropped his face into hands as the reality of the situation sank in. "Oh Merlin."

Luna tried to cheer him up. "But we can ask Madam Bones to stop the execution, and you'll be able to find out for definite."

"I'm so sorry, Remus." Lucy put an arm around Remus' shoulders, and then she glanced over at Harry and Luna to explain her

comment. "We've just arrived back from the execution. It was brought forward when Amelia became worried about a threat she had received. Since the execution had been kept out of the papers, she's worried she has a leak."

Luna staggered back into a chair. "Then we're too late."

Remus looked up and didn't bother to hide the fact that he was in tears. "I should have known. He tried to tell me but I didn't want to listen."

Albus patted Remus on the shoulder. "I'm afraid we have no time for self-recrimination, Remus. We need to figure out a way to rescue Sirius."

"But he's been executed," Luna pointed out, thinking that sometimes the Headmaster was even more batty than she was.

Albus smiled conspiratorially. "I know that." He called out. "Minchen!"

When the house-elf appeared, Albus gave an order.

Harry thought Albus' request rather strange. "Why do you want to see Hermione?"

"You will see in a moment," Albus said frustratingly.

Having had to complete her final exam on Muggle studies before she responded to Albus' request, it was twenty minutes later before Hermione came tentatively into the office. "You asked to see me, Headmaster?"

"Yes," Albus said. "Sit down."

Puzzled, Hermione glanced at Harry and Luna, but did as she was told. Albus then revealed what Luna and Harry had told him about the house-elf and Sirius' possible innocence. "So we need to rescue Sirius, and you, Miss Granger, have something I need."

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what the Headmaster wanted from her. "But it's keyed to me. Even you can't use it."

Albus already knew this. "Then I have an impossible favor to ask of you, Miss Granger. I need to ask for your help in freeing Sirius Black."

"But he's dead," Harry brought up the same point that Luna had earlier, not having caught on to what Albus had planned.

"Not if you go back in time, he isn't," Hermione said, filling Harry in on what Albus meant. "Professor Dumbledore wants my help to free him before he's executed."

"He can't ask you to do that," Harry said immediately, and then he turned on Albus. "You'd be risking her life to save a man that I'm still not convinced is innocent."

"I would also be risking your life, Harry," Albus said bluntly. "To get into the Death Chamber, you need level one clearance, something I believe you possess in the pass that Amelia gave to you."

Harry thought this rather strange. "But you have access, don't you?"

"I do, but my access is linked to my wand," Albus revealed. "And I am therefore unable to use it again as these events have already taken place."

Harry was confused. "I don't understand."

Hermione did, and she was only too happy to fill her friend in. "The Headmaster has already used his wand once to gain entrance at the execution, and it would be registered in the Ministry records if he used it again while he was supposed to be overseeing an execution." She looked to the Headmaster. "That's right, isn't it, Sir?"

"It is, Miss Granger," Albus confirmed.

Hermione nodded in satisfaction that she was correct. "And we will also have to be careful if we do this, since we've already been there as well."

Harry was now even more confused. "What?"

"If we're going to do this, then we've already saved Sirius, even if we don't know how yet," Hermione answered in simple terms.

"Okay..." Harry started to catch on and he pointed out another flaw in Albus' plan. "So if I've already been there, and I accessed any part of BritAD, then Amelia should already know it was me who used the pass."

Albus brought up an excellent argument. "Who would believe that you would ever help Sirius Black to escape?"

"What about me?" Luna asked, not wanting to be left out.

"Leading two students into danger is enough, Miss Graham-Lovegood," Albus said. "You will remain here."

Luna pouted. "But I want to help."

"Then help by being here," Albus said in a firm voice. "We may need you to provide Harry and Miss Granger with an alibi if anything does go wrong." He then turned to Harry and Hermione. "So are you willing help?"

Harry was torn, and his head was whirling. "I don't know."

Albus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know this is a terrible burden I'm placing on both of you, and I won't force either of you to undertake this quest if you don't wish to do it."

Harry met Hermione's eyes, but neither of them knew what to say. Harry therefore decided that before he said yes, first he should know what he was in for. "Can I see a memory of what happened before I decide?"

Remus immediately agreed to share his memory. "Of course, if the Headmaster doesn't mind letting me use his pensieve."

Albus did not, and the memory was extracted, the group entering the pensieve moments later.

Remus' memory

Having coming along for support, Lucy slipped her hand into Remus' as Sirius was led into the Death Chamber. "Don't look if you don't want to."

"I have to." Remus couldn't help but stare at the man who had destroyed his life and the lives of his friends.

Both fell silent as Albus asked if Sirius had anything to say before the execution was carried out.

Sirius turned to face Remus. "Remus, I didn't want to do it."

"Then why did you?" Remus asked, after struggling to find his voice.

"I had to," Sirius responded, unable to say anymore than that.

"And what about Lily and James?" Remus asked the same questions Harry had when faced with Sirius. "And my godson? Why did you betray them?"

Sirius could answer this question freely. "I swear I didn't do it. It was Wormtail. I asked James to swap me with him as their secret-keeper."

Remus shook his head in dismay. "Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Please, Moony," Sirius pleaded.

"Go to hell," Remus snarled, his face full of anger.

"I'm already there," Sirius murmured quietly before tearing his gaze away from his former friend. He knew that no matter what he said, Remus was not going to give him the final absolution he so desperately wanted for switching places with Wormtail. He therefore turned back to face Albus. "I'm ready."

Albus placed a black piece of cloth over his shoulder, and read out the death sentence. "Sirius Orion Black, you have been sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss for the murders of Petunia and Vernon Dursley, and for those of the fallen Aurors of Sixth Auror Division. After this sentence has been administered, your body will be cast through the Death Arch. May Merlin have mercy on your soul."

Sirius couldn't stop his face from paling or his legs from shaking as he was led behind a screen by two of the contingent of Aurors that had been guarding him.

While the issuing of the decree was public, the actual moment of the Kiss, and the sight of Sirius' body being cast into the arch would be hidden, as it was considered too horrific to watch. Only the Aurors who had volunteered would remain behind the screen to act as witnesses while the Dementor did its work. They would then be the ones to carry out the final part of the execution.

Present Time

Watching the memory, Harry winced as he heard Sirius call out Remus' name, and there was a bright flash of light before it was all over. Then the Dementor that had glided in at the back of the Death Chamber left the room, replete from its meal of Sirius' soul. Finally the screen dropped away to reveal only the two Aurors, who Amelia Bones dismissed. Harry noticed that one of them was looking rather pale and shaken. "He looks awful."

Albus had borne witness to the Kiss only once before, and the wizard it had been carried out on had had the most tortured look on his face that Albus had ever seen. "The Kiss is not a nice thing to see."

Hermione, however, was concentrating on something else. "Sirius was executed, so we either didn't go back, or we failed."

"You didn't actually see him being executed," Albus pointed out.

Harry acknowledged Albus' point "So perhaps we do help him, but I don't see how."

"That is what we have to figure out, if you agree to help," Albus told Harry.

Harry was still unsure. "I don't know."

Even though he was now convinced that Sirius was innocent, Remus did not try to force Harry, instead he put a hand on his

shoulder. "Harry, no-one here will think any less of you if don't rescue Sirius."

Harry looked up into Remus' eyes. "But you want me to rescue him, don't you?"

"Very much so," Remus said, his voice tinged with sadness. "He was my best friend at school, and I feel as though I let him down."

The mention of best friends brought up something else Harry had been wondering about. "He called you Moony, and I also heard him mention someone called Wormtail. Were you also friends with Padfoot and Prongs?"

Remus was taken aback by the question, having never given Harry that information. "Yes, but how could you know that?"

Harry told him about the map he and Justin had discovered. "Justin and I found a map some time ago. It was supposed to have been made by Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs."

"That's George's map," Hermione exclaimed. "He lost it."

"I wondered who had dropped it," Harry said, but he had no intention of handing it over to the Gryffindor, particularly if had belonged to Remus.

"So how did Mr. Weasley get it?" Albus asked, more than a little intrigued as to what the Map was.

Hermione bit her lip. "I can't tell you."

"I won't punish Mr. Weasley," Albus promised.

"I'd still rather not say, Sir," Hermione loyally said, not about to tell on George and Fred.

Albus did not push the matter. "I understand. So Harry, you found it?"

"I did, but all the Map gave was those strange names, so I had no idea who it belonged to, nor that it had been originally owned by

Remus." Harry wondered if one of the other makers had been his father. "So who were Padfoot, Wormtail, and Prongs?"

"Sirius was Padfoot; our friend Peter Pettigrew was Wormtail; and your dad was Prongs." Remus gave a smile as he thought back. "I think he'd be happy to know that you have the Map."

"I haven't used it or anything," Harry assured him quickly not wanting to get into trouble.

"What is this Map?" Albus asked, still in the dark.

Remus explained what the four boys had done. Albus was both proud and astonished. "That was a complicated piece of magic."

"It took us forever to do it," Remus owned. "But it was invaluable when it came to playing pranks."

"You played pranks?" Harry asked in amazement, only to be interrupted by Lucy.

"I think we're getting a little off topic," Lucy said gently. "You can talk about the Map later. Right now we need to decide if we're going to help Black or not."

Harry refocused on the matter at hand. "Okay, so there's a chance that Black might be innocent of killing the Dursleys, but what about my parents and my brother?"

Remus thought back to how Sirius had looked at him when he had begged him to understand, and said, "We have to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"And if we risk our lives for nothing?" Harry asked.

"I can't answer that," Remus said, not willing to choose for Harry. "But if Sirius is innocent, it makes sense why I was never able to feel anything from him to suggest he might turn traitor."

"In your memory Sirius blamed Pettigrew. Could he have actually betrayed Harry's family?" Hermione asked.

Luna interrupted before Remus could answer. "But didn't Pettigrew die a hero or something?"

Remus had truly believed that his former friend had died a hero but with what he had discovered that day, he was now questioning what he knew. "Peter supposedly faced up against Sirius, blaming Sirius for betraying James. There was an explosion where thirteen Muggles died, and it was believed that Peter died in it; all they found was his finger. But now I'm not so sure."

Albus found himself agreeing. "So do you have any idea where Peter might be now if he is still alive?"

Remus shrugged. "I don't but if he is guilty, then he's probably hiding out with the other rats in the sewers."

"Other rats?" Albus questioned Remus' statement.

"Wormtail was a rat Animagus," Remus revealed the secret he had kept for so long from Albus.

"And you think he's in the sewers?" Hermione felt rather disgusted at the thought. "Even as a rat Animagus, why would anyone hide out there?"

"Where better to camouflage yourself?" Remus asked quite rightly.

Luna added another alternative. "Or perhaps he became someone's pet."

Hermione gasped as Luna's idea brought up a possibility, and then she shook her head. "There's no way."

"Miss Granger?" Albus questioned Hermione's exclamation. "Would you care to elaborate?"

Hermione wanted to be sure before she said anything damning. "The finger they found, was it from his right hand?"

"Yes," Remus confirmed. "But how did you know that?"

"Ron's pet rat Scabbers used to be missing a toe on its front right paw," Hermione said slowly. "You don't think...?"

"How long has he had it?" Remus asked urgently.

Hermione had listened to Ron moan about the rat often enough to know the answer, as had Harry and Luna, all three children therefore chorusing together, "since first year".

Hermione, however, added a rejoinder. "But it had been in their family for years; I think about ten."

"Rats don't live that long," Lucy remarked. "Not even magical rats."

"Then it could be Pettigrew." Remus turned to Albus, his visage happier than it had been all day. "If we can rescue Sirius, and then deliver Peter, we can prove his innocence."

Harry closed his eyes in dismay, before opening them again. "You won't be able to do that. Nagini ate Scabbers. It's the reason Ron has Pig. I bought him for Ron to replace Scabbers."

"You're sure it was this Scabbers she ate?" Remus asked, not knowing the full story.

Harry nodded, and explained what had happened. "I was taking care of Scabbers for Ron when Hermione knocked Scabbers onto the floor. It was too much of a temptation for Nagini, and she went after him. I tried to stop her but couldn't."

Albus lifted his wand. "I'd like to see the memory, if I may."

Harry let Albus take the memory, shivering at the feeling. "That still feels weird."

"You really do get used to it." Albus dropped the memory into the pensieve. "Please all join hands."

The group did so, and Albus immersed them inside the pensieve. Almost as soon as the memory began, Albus froze it, and turned to Remus. "Remus, is it him?"

Remus studied the rat that was sitting on Harry's desk. "Yes. Pettigrew's tail was always kinked at the end, and there's a mark on his back where he hurt himself as a boy and it scarred."

Harry, Hermione, Lucy, and Luna all looked closely at the rat, and they could all see what Remus was talking about. "If he was an Animagus, why didn't he change before it was too late?"

"I don't know, Miss Graham-Lovegood," Albus answered. "Let's run the memory."

Just before Nagini pounced, Harry pointed out something that neither he nor Hermione had spotted when they had been living the reality of the memory. "Scabbers looks as though he's swelling."

Albus reran the memory. "You're right. I believe he was going to change, but he left it too late."

"What would have happened to his wand?" Hermione asked.

"It became part of him when he changed, and it would have been absorbed by the snake," Remus explained.

"But a wand is magical," Hermione pointed out. "Wouldn't it hurt the snake?"

"No." Remus shook his head. "It becomes dormant when it melds with you when you change, just like your clothing." He then turned back to the Headmaster. "I think I would like to see this through to the end, just to make sure that Wormtail is really gone."

Albus let the memory run, ending it when Scabbers had been consumed entirely. "I think we can safely say that we can't prove Sirius' innocence now."

"But we have the memory," Luna interjected. "Madam Bones would at least have to listen."

Remus immediately refuted Luna's assumption. "We only have my word that Scabbers is Wormtail. And I'm afraid if Amelia finds out that I am a werewolf, my testimony will be discarded, to say nothing of bringing my teaching career to an end."

Harry disagreed. "She's different, Remus. I'm sure she would understand."

Albus asked a humdinger of a question. "Maybe so, Harry. But would you be willing to risk one man's livelihood and another man's life on your belief?"

Harry was not and he therefore came up with an alternative suggestion. "How about the house-elf testifying?"

"House-elves are considered magical creatures, Harry, as are werewolves," Hermione gave Remus an apologetic look. "Just like Remus, that house-elf would be ignored."

Albus agreed with Hermione. "Miss Granger is correct, so if we rescue Sirius, he will have to go into hiding." He then turned to Harry. "We can talk more about this later but right now, I need to know if you are willing to aid in the rescue."

Harry closed his eyes as he debated what was at stake, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself looking into Lucy's. It was then he recalled the conversation that he had had with her about the Salem Witch Trials, and he knew what he had to do. "I once told Lucy that if I knew someone was innocent of a crime then I would do whatever I had to in order to save them. And all the evidence is now telling me that Sirius Black is innocent."

Remus squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Thank you."

"Miss Granger?" Albus asked the girl who would be the lynchpin for the whole thing.

Hermione thought about how awful it must have been for Sirius to be forced into doing something he didn't want, and she also thought about how terrified Sirius had looked just before his execution. And it was this memory that helped Hermione to come to a decision. "I want to help as well."

Albus sat down. "Then we have some planning to do."

Luna, however, stayed on her feet. "We're missing something important, Sir. While we know that Sirius Black is innocent, how did that house-elf know in the first place? Harry said earlier it might be a trap, and although the house-elf might be innocent, how can we be certain we're not heading into disaster?"

"An excellent observation, Miss Graham-Lovegood," Albus said, before he called out, "Minchen."

When the house-elf appeared, Albus began to question it, discovering that the mysterious house-elf who had spoken to Harry was known to the Hogwarts' house-elves as French, and was considered to be a force for good. Albus still wanted to speak to it, however. "Can you contact this French and ask him to come here?"

"Yes, Master Albus." Minchen bowed lowed and vanished.

Remus immediately asked. "French?"

"Yes," Albus confirmed the name of the house-elf.

"I know who his master is," Remus said, just as French appeared. "Hello, French."

"Mr. Remus," French said politely. "How can I help you?"

"I need to know how you know about Sirius," Remus demanded.

French told him. "I intercepted a house-elf who was trying to find Mr. Harry, and took him to my Master. The house-elf then told us about Mr. Sirius, and my Master told me to pass the news on to Mr. Harry."

"Who is your Master?" Hermione chimed in.

French refused to tell her. "I cannot tell you without his permission."

"His master is called Dae Venant," Remus informed everyone. "By a strange twist of fate, I was his roommate at University." He turned his attention back to French. "So what does Dae have to do with this?"

"He wanted you to help Sirius Black," French said.

Albus made a demand of French. "Tell him that we are willing to help free Sirius, but that we need to speak to him first."

"I am aware that you are already too late," French revealed that he knew that Sirius had been executed.

"Not with this we're not," Hermione said and she lifted up the time-turner that was hanging around her neck.

French knew what it was, and he bowed low. "I will return shortly."

It was less than two minutes later when he did so. "My Master has agreed to meet with you but he would like to arrive via floo."

Albus walked over to his fireplace and touched the panel with his hand. "He can come through when he's ready. Tell him to call out 'Albus' office'."

French vanished, and almost immediately the fireplace flared up.

Dae stepped out to find all eyes on him, and he was glad to see at least one familiar face. "Good afternoon, Headmaster Dumbledore. Remus, it's good to see you again."

Remus smiled back. "Dae."

"Mr. Venant," Albus responded politely. "I might normally consider small talk but time is of the essence here, so I was wondering why you haven't tried to help Sirius Black yourself rather than placing the responsibility on others."

Dae gave a very good reason. "Because initially I hoped to stop the execution. When French told me that it had already taken place, I thought all was lost until he mentioned the time-turner. And as you might have guessed, I don't have a time-turner, and I'm surprised you do."

Hermione explained. "I needed it to catch up from being petrified in my third year, as I wanted to complete everything I started."

"And you still have it now?" Dae asked, thinking that Hermione must be a rather slow learner.

Hermione guessed what he was intimating, and she went red. "I was taking every course that was offered, and I had to complete the core ones from third year before I could join fourth year classes. After that I decided to take finish the extra courses from third year as well, but with everything that has happened this year, including my father

dying, it has taken me longer than expected. I've therefore just finished my final exam today."

Remus could feel the skepticism coming from Dae. "Hermione is top of every class in her year except for Defense."

Dae was reluctantly impressed, but he did not reveal this. "What happened to Defense?"

"Harry did," Hermione said, smiling at her friend.

Harry went red. "It's just one class. You're brilliant at everything else."

Dae quickly garnered that there might be something going on between Harry and Hermione, but barely knowing either of them, he refrained from commenting. "I suppose I should say that we are lucky that you are so dedicated to your school studies, otherwise there would be no way of helping Black."

"Why should we trust you?" Lucy was rather suspicious of the man's intentions. "You say you want to help, but you've given us no reason as to why you would want to do so."

"I want to do the right thing," Dae said. "And I believe that rescuing Black is the right thing."

"It still doesn't mean we should trust you," Lucy came back.

"Look, Red, I didn't have to send French to you, nor did I have to come here," Dae pointed out, finding Lucy rather abrasive.

"My name is Professor Viking," Lucy snapped, disliking Dae as much as he appeared to dislike her. "And just because you're here, does not mean that this isn't a trap of some sort."

"I'm well aware that French has made a pledge, and I'm quite sure that the Headmaster is equally aware that French would have died if he had been lying," Dae barked back, before reining in his rather short temper. "However, to prove I only have good intentions, I am willing to go along to help."

"You might turn on us," Lucy said, still unwilling to trust the man.

"I might but I give you my word that I will not," Dae said irritably, and he deliberately turned his back on Lucy. "Now as the Headmaster has pointed out, time is ticking along, and if we want to get Black out, then we need to start planning, so this is the time to decide, do you want my help or not?"

Albus glanced at Remus, who gave a slight nod, and Albus answered for all those gathered. "Remus appears to trust you, so I am also going to do so."

"Thank you," Dae said as he inclined his head politely. "First of all, I require everyone's promise that what happens here today will stay strictly between us."

"Why?" Lucy asked in a snotty voice.

"That's none of your business," Dae said shortly.

Lucy bristled visibly. "You can't tell us why, and yet you expect us to trust you."

"I do," Dae said, and he turned to the others. "I am willing to give you my word that my reasons for helping are perfectly good ones, and ones I may consider sharing once I know if I can trust you. But if you want my help, I want your word that my part in this rescue will be known only to us."

Albus glanced again at Remus, who had sensed that Dae was being honest, and Remus therefore nodded. And so, one by one everyone there agreed, all except for Lucy. "I want your oath that you are doing this purely for reasons of good, and not for some nefarious purpose."

Dae took out his wand and resisted using it on the irritating redhead. "I solemnly swear that my reasons for helping are strictly well intended, and that I have no intention of leading anyone into a trap."

Lucy had to be satisfied, and she finally took out her wand and reciprocated, offering to keep what was about to take place a secret.

Once she had done so, Dae started to bark out some orders. "First of all, I need to see a memory of the execution. Only then can I decide what to do."

Lucy scowled at Dae's bossy tone. "Since when are you in charge?"

"Since I sent my house-elf to tell you that Black is innocent," Dae retorted, seriously wishing he could hex the uncompromising redhead until she shut up. Again turning his back on her, Dae pointed at the pensieve on the table. "I take it that someone has already placed a memory in there, or is it just for show?"

"My memory is inside," Remus said, stepping up to stand beside him.

"Then let's see it," Dae moved towards the pensieve, but only Remus joined him. "Just you?"

"Nobody else here needs to view the memory again." Albus said. "I will key the pensieve so Remus can use it."

Once inside Remus began the memory.

Dae said nothing during the whole thing, not until it ended. "We need to take the place of those two Aurors before they go in, and then somehow rescue Black when he's hidden by the screen. It's going to be the only way to rescue Black without a full scale break-in."

"I agree." Remus looked at the frozen memory. "So how do you propose to do that?"

"You obviously had a plan to get into the Chamber yourself," Dae commented.

"Harry was going to use his pass to get in. We hadn't gotten much further than that in our discussions, but I believe that we would have ended up trying to rescue Sirius before he was taken from the cells," Remus informed him. "But your way might be better."

Dae was astounded. "You were going to let a child take part?"

"We didn't have any choice," Remus said regretfully. "And even if we don't use Harry to get in, we'll still need Hermione. She's the only one with a timeturner, and it's keyed to her."

"And I doubt Mr. Potter is going to let his girlfriend go in without him even if he didn't have a pass," Dae commented.

"She's just his friend." Remus let Dae know what the status quo was. "But a good friend, and you're right, Harry wouldn't let her do so alone."

"We still might need him to get into the Aurors' quarters," Dae revealed he knew that a pass was required to access them. "But I'm not entirely happy about using children."

"I was hoping not to use them at all with you being here, but you're right, we still might have to," Remus acknowledged. "So as you're in charge, if we actually manage to succeed in taking over from these Aurors, how do you plan to get Sirius out?"

"We're going to walk out of the front door," Dae said boldly. "And I have the feeling we do succeed. Black called out your name, and it sounded more like surprise than despair. I therefore believe you revealed yourself to him, and he involuntarily responded."

Remus rewound the memory and listened again. "You're correct. I didn't notice."

"That's why I'm in charge, Remus." Dae smiled though to take the edge off his comment. "I also believe that the flash we saw is the Patronus charm."

"I thought it was a flash from activating the archway," Remus said, staring at the frozen flash. "Albus said it hasn't been used for an execution in over a hundred years, and so no-one knew what to expect."

"Which works to our advantage," Dae quite correctly stated. "Before the screen drops, we need to place an invisibility spell on Sirius."

"I can carry him if we put a featherweight charm on him first," Remus said, not revealing that he could carry Sirius with ease without one. "But I can't cast a Patronus charm."

"I can," Dae told him, before looking Remus up and down judging his size. "We'll both need extra wands, polyjuice potion, a copy of those uniforms, and we also need to figure out somewhere to hide in the Ministry." Deciding he was done, he left the pensieve. Glancing around the empty room, he asked, "Where are the children?"

"Gone to fetch a few things, including the polyjuice potion I suspect you'll need," Albus informed him. "Professor Viking has gone with them. When they return here, they will travel with you and Remus back in time to the library to just after the moment the children learn about Sirius, and come here to see me. After a decent time period, Miss Graham-Lovegood will re-enter the library. And then a few minutes later Harry and Miss Granger will follow her, and start studying together. Shortly afterwards, Harry will make an excuse about needing a book. Miss Granger will then accompany him to the back of the library to find one. You will be waiting for them, and you'll travel back in time from there."

Dae took in the rather lengthy explanation, but he wanted to make sure that the children knew what to do. "Do they know that after they have played their part that they have to return to the back of the library at the exact moment they left?"

"They do." Albus glanced over at the door. "Here they are now."

After some more discussion, the plan was about to be put into action when Albus received a missive. "It's from Madam Bones saying she needs to discuss security at BritAD."

Harry gulped. "Do you think she discovered my pass has been used?"

"Perhaps," Albus acknowledged. "But whatever issue it is, it will have to wait a while we go over the plan."

Dae broke in. "While we do, I'll have French arrange for the wands everyone will need, and to collect two Aurors' uniforms."

Harry brought up a good point. "French can get in anywhere, so why don't you just use him to get Sirius out?"

"He can't get into the Ministry," Albus informed Harry. "Only Ministry approved house-elves can access the wards. That is why your pass is so important."

The point dealt with, French was sent on his mission while the group ran through the plan one final time. Once French returned, everyone who was to return to the past then traveled back to the moment after Harry and Luna had spoken to French in the library. It felt strange for Harry to see himself and Luna running up the corridor.

And it wasn't too long after that when Luna returned. She also had George and Samantha in tow. As she passed the door, Luna winked, and headed inside the library. Only then did Remus whisper to Harry, "Drop the invisibility spell, and go in. Dae, Lucy, and I will move to the back of the library."

Harry did as he was asked. Samantha's face lit up at the sight of Harry, and she tilted her head up. "Luna said you would be coming in."

Harry dropped a quick kiss on her mouth, before sitting down beside her. Hermione sat between Harry and George, taking out her final piece of arithmancy homework for the year.

Harry did the same, only pulling out his ancient runes homework. Five minutes after starting on it, he scowled. "I'm having problems with this stupid rune again."

Hermione, who had deliberately sat next to him, looked over. "I've done that question already but I don't know the answer off the top of my head. I'll need to get Maxim on Runes."

"I'll come with you," Harry said, and getting up, he followed Hermione into the back of the library.

Once there, Hermione lengthened the chain that held her time-turner and slipped it around everyone's necks. "Well, here goes nothing." After winding back the turner, the group vanished.

Looking down at the table, George suddenly realized that the book Hermione had mentioned was actually lying in the pile in front of where Harry had been sitting. "I'm just going to tell them that it's

here." With that, George got up and headed towards the back of the library.

Thank you to Lycus for giving me the idea about Wormtail's wand.

Next Chapter: Not everything goes to plan; Harry and Hermione have a close shave; George gets a nasty shock.

Chapter 51: Breaking Out and Breaking Up

BritAD, Two Hours Prior to Execution

Amelia frowned as she reviewed the warning that had been received that morning. "Thank you, Solace. I'll take it from here." Once she was alone, Amelia sat thinking about the possible implications if the writer of the threat succeeded in breaking Sirius out, and she therefore made a decision about the timing of the execution. Taking out a piece of parchment, she began to draft up a new execution document, one which would bring forward Sirius' death. She then got to her feet, and headed for the Minister's office.

As she stood waiting for the lift, she glanced behind her and frowned. Then she shook her head. "I must be seeing things."

Once she arrived at Cornelius Fudge's office, Cornelius reviewed the new order, and added his signature. "Better to be safe than sorry. We can't afford for anyone to spring Black. It wouldn't do for him to go after Harry Potter."

"It was really strange that you should mention Harry," Amelia remarked as she signed her own name to the warrant. "I could have sworn I just saw him walking through the Atrium. Well, it looked like him from behind."

"Perhaps he's visiting," Cornelius suggested.

"It's term time," Amelia reminded him. "I think a lack of sleep and stress are getting to me. I thought I spotted Susan yesterday, only to find it wasn't her."

"Perhaps you would like to take some vacation?" Cornelius asked.

"I'm going to take a few days off once this has been dealt with," Amelia informed him.

"Why don't you take a breather before midday?" Cornelius suggested.

Amelia wished it were that simple. "I can't. I have a meeting with Destin Simon, the head of French Auror Division in a few moments,

and then I'll be going out to see Albus to get him to sign this after that."

"So it will definitely all be over by midday?" Cornelius now wanted the whole nasty matter to be finished with, so that he could get on with life as usual.

"It will," Amelia confirmed. "I will see you later, Cornelius."

Ninety Minutes Prior to Execution

In a store cupboard on the eighth level, Harry, Remus, Dae, and Hermione all waited. Harry wished Remus would stop fidgeting, and he checked the time on his watch. "We still have forty-five minutes before you and Dae need to make the switch, Remus."

"I just want to get it over and done with." Remus was horribly nervous. "Standing in here is driving me mad."

"You can't bump into yourself," Hermione reminded him of the golden rule of time travel. "You could end up killing yourself."

Remus wanted to snap at the girl who he would usually praise for her knowledge. But instead he forced himself to acknowledge her point calmly. "I know that, Hermione." He then burrowed further into the back of the cupboard, trying to get comfortable.

"Do you really think we can get Sirius out?" Harry asked, once Remus had stopped squirming.

Remus did not want to say that he was very afraid that they would fail, hence his bout of nerves. Instead he hedged. "I don't know, but we have to try."

"But what if it something does go wrong?" Hermione asked in a worried voice.

"Then you'll be reading about our executions," Dae remarked in a dry voice.

Dae's words made Harry shiver. "I feel cold."

"It's just nerves," Dae told him. "Put your cloak around you."

Harry had almost forgotten about his invisibility cloak that he had shoved into his pocket. Taking it out, he wrapped it around himself, before remembering the others in the cupboard. Everyone else except for Hermione said they were fine, and so Harry ended up sharing with it with Hermione alone.

Less than five minutes had gone by when Remus started fidgeting again. Harry wondered if he really was cold despite his earlier denial that he was not. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," Remus tried to reassure Harry, although he knew it was a lie; in truth he felt like vomiting.

In contrast, across from him, Dae appeared so relaxed that he could have been at a tea party, and not about to break out a prisoner who was to be executed in less than two hours. But Remus could sense Dae's fear, and he supposed that the man was presenting a front for the frightened children. Remus therefore decided he should also try to do the same, and he forced himself to relax and smile as Hermione asked yet another question.

Forty-five Minutes Prior to Execution

It was almost the time when Albus had said that the Aurors would be around, and a thoroughly relieved Remus therefore held out his hand, anxious to finally be doing something. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry shook Remus' hand and reminded him that his part was not over yet. "I still have to get you inside."

"Just make sure you leave as soon as you have done so," Dae cautioned Harry. He was still uncomfortable that Harry and Hermione had had to be a part of this, and he would feel better knowing that they had safely made it out.

"We will," Harry promised.

Across the cupboard Remus was placing an invisibility spell on Hermione, and he soon did the same to Harry. "I'm going to need your cloak."

Harry handed it over, grabbing Remus' hand to place it in. "I hope it's big enough to cover Sirius."

"It will have to do," Remus said as he stuffed the cloak into his jacket, before placing an invisibility spell on himself. "It's only a precautionary measure just in case something goes wrong with the invisibility spell."

"A little silence would be good now," Dae warned, and everyone stopped talking. Then he carefully opened the door, and looked around. "It's all clear."

The invisible quartet left the cupboard and headed up the corridor to where Harry would have to play his part. Placing his pass against the door, Harry spoke clearly but in a low voice. "Harry Potter, access Auror Security Office."

The door swung open, and Harry felt rather than saw his three companions go by. Then he heard Dae's voice whispering, "Now get out."

Harry did not respond; instead he carefully made his way over to the Auror floo departure area, where he had told Hermione to move to as soon as she got into the room. There were a few people standing around, but of course he couldn't see Hermione. After the bystanders had departed, Harry whispered softly, "Where are you?"

"To your left," a voice came back, "against the wall."

Harry felt his way along the wall until he came into contact with Hermione. As he looked at the floo system, he was struck by something that had not occurred to him until that very moment. "Do you think that now is a bad time to mention that I've never used the Auror floo system before?"

Hermione experienced a moment of alarm, before calming down and trying to think clearly. "In that case I don't think it's a good idea to use it now. Come on, let's try and get back out the way we came

in. We can make our way back out into the Atrium and use the public floo system."

Harry let Hermione tug him away, the door opening without a problem back into the corridor. But just as they passed by the cupboard they had been hiding in earlier, Harry thought about Remus and Dae and what they were up against. He therefore pulled Hermione inside, and told her what he had decided to do. "Hermione, I'm not leaving until I know they're out safely."

"But they told us to leave," Hermione said in protest.

"And you are leaving," Harry said in a decisive voice, before giving instructions. "Head to the public floo system and use that. If it's busy then wait until the coast is clear but whatever you do, don't get apparating, you'll leave a magical signature. And if you do that, Amelia might work out about the time-turner."

"But your pass has been used," Hermione reminded him.

"My stolen pass has been used," Harry said in a forceful voice. "Now please, go. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I'm not leaving you. We will both wait to make sure that they get out safely," Hermione responded just as forcefully.

Harry had half-expected some resistance, and he therefore tried to make Hermione see it from his point of view. "Hermione, if this goes wrong, I'm the Boy Who Lived, and I stand a fairly good chance of talking my way out of things because of that. But you won't have that title to fall back on."

Hermione was having none of it, and started to argue. "But Harry..."

"Hermione, you're going!" Harry said adamantly, his voice even more authoritative than it had been a moment ago. "Now find your way to the public floo, and get out. I'll meet you and Lucy behind the Shrieking Shack as we arranged. If I don't make it back, then return to Hogwarts without me."

Hermione experienced a jump of fear at the thought of what that would mean, and this made her even more resolute about staying.

"Harry, you can try and boss me about all you like. I'm still not going to leave you behind."

With Harry's attempt to order Hermione out having failed, he decided to try and use a different tactic. He therefore reached out for, and found Hermione's hand, his voice soft and pleading when he spoke. "Hermione, please do as I ask. Your mother would be heartbroken if anything happened to you. She's already been through enough this year."

Hermione was more than a little angry at Harry's underhanded ploy but the guilt she experienced at what she knew Virginia would go through if something did happen to her swayed her into doing as Harry wanted. "Fine, I'll go. But I'm not leaving the Shrieking Shack until you arrive."

A very thankful Harry pulled Hermione into a hug. "Thank you."

"Please be careful," Hermione pleaded, and aiming for Harry's invisible cheek, she managed to place a kiss on the corner of Harry's mouth before dropping her invisibility spell and reluctantly slipping out of the door and leaving.

Once she was gone, Harry removed his own invisibility spell. He hated the feeling of it, and could easily replace it if necessary, something he knew that Remus was not aware of since Harry had promised Amelia he would keep his training to himself. Checking his watch, and finding that there were still thirty-eighty minutes left, Harry muttered, "Come on time, come on time."

Ten Minutes after Midday

An invisible Harry stood in the Atrium, watching for any sign of either the Aurors who were supposed to have carried out the executions, or Remus and Dae, if their polyjuice had worn off. After slipping away, he dropped his invisibility spell as he checked his watch yet again to make sure he was right about the time. On seeing that just over ten minutes had gone by since the execution had been scheduled and no-one had come by, Harry was afraid that something must have gone badly wrong. After re-establishing the spell, and then making himself wait another few minutes still with no

results, Harry decided to try and find out what was going. He therefore headed off intending to make his way down to the ninth level. "I'm so getting into trouble."

On reaching the ninth level, he stealthily made his way along the corridor, his heart in his mouth as he passed a few people he did not recognize being escorted by two Aurors, who he did. Harry guessed that they had been witnesses at the execution, and his stomach threatened to betray him as his nerves returned full force. Swallowing continually until the urge to vomit had passed, Harry thankfully came up to the door that led to the spinning room. He just hoped his stomach would not start up again as he opened the door and stepped into the room.

Once inside, Harry prayed the spinning room would pick the door that led to the Death Chamber; he didn't dare identify himself using his pass, as his magical signature could not be stolen. Suddenly a door opened and he was catapulted through the open doorway. Picking himself up off the floor, Harry instantly recognized the room he had been spat into as the Hall of Prophecies. And he was relieved to find it empty, or so he thought. Just as he was about to leave, a disembodied voice whispered "H, is that you?"

Harry's legs turned to relieved jelly as he recognized Dae's voice. "What are you doing in here, and where's Remus?"

"At my feet, together with Black," Dae said in a tense voice, showing his anxiety. "Is Hermione with you?"

"No, I sent her ahead," Harry said, and asked, "What happened?"

"We'll talk about it later," Dae said urgently. "Right now we need to get out before the Aurors we polyjuiced are missed, or worse, their bodies found."

"Bodies?" Harry asked in a concerned voice.

"They're just unconscious," Dae informed Harry, a little angry that he would believe that Dae had killed the men. "And right now, someone might already be well on their way to coming across them. So if you would take Black, I'll take Remus."

As he had done with the invisibility spell, Harry flicked his spare wand out again, not wishing to leave his usual magical signature. Feeling around with his foot, he found who he was looking for, and tugging off the cloak, he renewed the featherlight charm on the invisible Sirius, heaving him up off the floor. As he headed towards the door, Harry gave Dae a warning. "When we get out, we're going to simply have to hope that we find the exit. I really don't want to risk using my pass in here if at all possible."

Dae did not want Harry using it either unless absolutely necessary. "Then we'll have to take our chances and hope as you said."

Harry tightened his grip on Sirius. "Make sure you have a firm hold on Remus."

"I got him and Black in here, so I think I can get just Remus out," Dae pointed out, his answer short and laced with some anger, fear driving his emotions. "Now come on."

It took them three attempts to find the exit, and by the time they did, Harry was sweating with fear. If he could have seen Dae, he would have seen that he too was in the same state. After removing the invisibility spell, and placing the slightly less effective disillusionment spell, and Mobilicorpus on Sirius, Harry decided once more it would be best not to use his pass again as they reached the door to the stairwell. "I think we should use the public floo to leave, rather than going back to the Auror Security Office."

"But the Auror floo is..." Dae started to protest, only for an alarm to begin screeching. "Shit. They must have found the Aurors. They're going into lockdown."

"Hermione, please have gotten out," Harry said under his breath as he began to hurry up the stairs. He was unable to see Dae but he turned in what he believed to be his general direction. "We need to find another way out."

"I thought you realized, Harry," Dae hissed back at Harry as he negotiated the stairs, hoping he wasn't bumping the almost impossible to see Remus as he floated him up in front of him. "Lockdown means that everything locks down: the floos, the apparition points, the walk-in exits – everything!"

"Then it looks like Hermione will be reading about our executions after all," Harry said, trying to be flippant but instead his tremulous voice revealed how frightened he was.

Dae pressed himself against the wall, Harry doing the same, as two Aurors entered from the eighth level and began to head down the stairwell. Harry could feel even more beads of sweat running down the back of his neck making his soggy shirt even damper, and he almost collapsed in relief when the Aurors passed by and headed through the doorway to the ninth level below. From his viewpoint, Harry could see through the closing door that led to the eighth level that there were a great of deal of Aurors milling around, some of whom were coming their way. "It looks as though we're about to overrun. We can't go back in there without bumping into an Auror."

"We'll head for the second level," Dae decided.

Harry gaped although he knew Dae could not see him doing so. "That's the level with the most activity apart from this one!"

"But it's also the level less likely to be overrun by Aurors. Most of them will be out patrolling the other levels," Dae said knowledgeably. "And no-one in their right mind would try to use Auror Division headquarters to hide in."

"Thanks for telling me now that you're mental," Harry said sarcastically.

Dae refrained from snapping at Harry – he knew that the boy had to be terrified, and he was far being alone in that feeling. "It's our best bet to hide, Harry. Now let's go."

Four times the two of them encountered Aurors on the stairwell, and each time somehow they managed to avoid them; both Harry and Dae hovering their charges over the hollow in the stairwell so that they couldn't be run into or hit the staircases above their heads. Harry wondered how Sirius Black would feel if he ever discovered that Harry had risked dropping him seven floors to a possible sticky death on the ground far below.

On entering the second level, Harry again found himself hovering Sirius high in the air. This time though, it was above people's heads, and Harry just hoped that the man would not suddenly come around.

After making his way past numerous empty cubicles, Harry spotted an empty room to his left, and he hissed out as quietly as possible, "Dae."

Dae rolled his eyes in frustration as Harry's whisper carried not only to his ears, but to someone else's as well. An elderly man in a green robe turned around. "Die? Who said that?"

"Hearing things again, Norton?" a man Harry recognized as Arthur Weasley asked.

"I thought I heard someone say 'die'," Norton told him, staring around in dismay.

"There's no-one here," Arthur said, not even bothering to look around him as Norton was a notorious tippler, and had a very nervous disposition. "I know this sort of thing isn't your cup of tea, Norton. So why don't you take a break until the lockdown is over?"

"I think I will, Arthur," Norton said, patting his pocket. "I think I will."

Harry had by now slipped into the empty room, and Dae had followed but both were alarmed when Norton chose the same room to enter. Neither of them had realized it was the break room for the floor's occupants. Unaware of what was happening around him, Norton pulled out a flask, and took a nip from it, before settling down on a chair.

After lowering Remus to the ground, Dae drew his wand and whispered, "Somnio", and Norton drifted off to sleep and began snoring rather loudly almost immediately. Only then did Dae whisper in Harry's direction. "If anyone looks in, they won't suspect we're in here."

"Well, it helps that we're invisible, and I doubt they'll hear us over that row!" Harry winced as Norton let out a loud grunt before resuming his chainsaw snoring.

Dae wished he could cast a silencing spell but if anyone came in it would give them away. "Ignore him, Harry. We have to figure a way out."

"I don't know what to suggest," Harry responded, his head aching from stress, fear, and now the noise coming from Norton. Neither of them spoke for a few moments, and then Harry rubbed his forehead and asked, "What about when the lockdown finishes?"

"Everyone will be checked as they leave," Dae told him, being well aware of the Ministry's protocol for dealing with such an emergency. "And given what's happened here today, I suspect there will be a sweep of the whole building using methods that we won't find particularly pleasant."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, a small frisson of alarm going through him at Dae's anxious tone of voice.

So Dae explained as much as he knew. "A special team of Aurors will use something similar to Muggle tear gas to carry out the sweep, only this gas kills."

Harry was shocked, not having covered such a thing in the time he had spent at BritAD. "How do you know that?"

"My ex-girlfriend was an Auror," Dae said, inordinately glad he had dated Aditi, who had been something of a chatterbox. "But it's only used in extreme cases."

Another alarm began sounding, and Harry's heart sped up. "What is that?"

Dae's worst fears were being recognized. "Evacuation signal. Everyone's leaving, so I think we can safely say that we're an extreme case."

He fell silent when the door opened, and Arthur Weasley entered the room, and after some effort, managed to wake Norton. Once the two men had left and the door was shut, Dae made a suggestion. "Harry, I want you to give yourself up. Tell them I made you help me."

"There must be another way out," Harry said in frustration, not willing to quit after all that they had gone through.

Dae could not think of one. "There isn't, so drop your invisibility spell and go."

"I'm not leaving," Harry said stubbornly, and as he looked around the room he noticed something. "Dae, do you know how they get fresh air back in here after they use the bombs?"

"A spell I should think," Dae said, never having asked his ex-girlfriend that particular question.

Harry pointed up at the square high up on the wall, and then realized that Dae was unable to see him. Dropping his invisibility spell, Harry pointed upwards again. "What's that?"

Harry hit the floor two seconds later as Dae's stunning spell struck him. When Harry had materialized, Dae had decided he had to save Harry by taking him out of the building at wandpoint, hopefully preventing anyone from fumigating the place, and allowing Sirius and Remus to leave once the all clear had been given. Now though, he realized what Harry had been pointing out. "Ventilation shafts! They must take air from the outside to minimize on the magical power needed to keep things running."

As he spoke, Dae quickly revived Harry and apologized when the boy griped at him. "Sorry, I was going to try and save you by handing you over and giving myself up."

Harry scowled. "I'm not going to allow you to do that."

"We might not have to. I think you might be onto something," Dae said as he nodded upwards. "Levitate me up."

Harry did as he was asked, waiting impatiently while Dae examined the grill. "Can we get through?"

Dae judged the size of the opening. "I think so." He then aimed his wand at the grill, removing the screws holding it in, and taking it out. "Let me down."

Harry refused. "Get in, and I'll levitate Remus and Sirius up after I remove their disillusionment spells. You can then levitate me up."

"I need to get down in order to place this grill somewhere from where I can summon it to reinstall it," Dae explained. "I want to leave as little evidence as possible that we were ever here."

Harry therefore cancelled his spell, and after a few minutes pushing and shoving, all four of them were safely inside the shaft, and the grill had been replaced. "I wish I had a headlamp."

Dae could barely believe what he was hearing. "What do they teach in transfiguration?"

"Not how to make a Muggle headlamp," Harry remarked smartly.

Dae therefore pulled his Auror's scarf off, and transfigured it into a lamp, placing it on his own head. "I'll float Remus and lead the way. You follow with Black."

A tense ten minutes later, and Harry found himself joining Dae at a dead end. "What now?"

"Look up," Dae instructed. "I can see daylight."

"So I should float you up?" Harry asked.

"Float me up," Dae confirmed.

Once Dae reached the top of the shaft, he found a much bigger grill, and after kicking it out and emerging into the daylight, Dae discovered he was on the rooftop of a building. Leaning down into the shaft, he called to Harry. "Place Remus at the bottom of the shaft. I'll levitate him from up here."

Harry did as he was ordered, and, as soon as Remus was out of the way, Dae also did the same to Sirius. And then it was Harry's turn. And it turned out to be not a moment too soon. Just as Harry began rising upwards, smoke drifted along to where he had been standing. Harry realized it was not going to follow him though – he felt the sizzle of wards as he moved upwards and into the safety of the fresh air.

Collapsing onto the gritty covering of the roof, Harry wiped a shaky hand over his sweaty face. "That was close."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Dae warned him. "You have to get back to Hogwarts, as does Remus."

"What about Sirius?" Harry asked, reluctantly getting to his feet.

"I'll take him for tonight but after that Remus will have to come through with somewhere else for him to stay," Dae said, reluctant to house the man for any longer than that.

"Sirius can stay at my house," Harry decided, wanting to make up for what Sirius had gone through. "But we'll need to tell Cordie, who lives at my house, as well as telling my other friends, the truth about why Sirius is there."

Dae shook his head. "One of your friends is Susan Bones."

"We'll think of something to tell her if she visits," Harry said. "And it will hopefully only be for the short term."

Dae was not entirely happy with this but relented a little. "We can meet at my house tomorrow if you're free. No doubt this Cordie will want an explanation, and you and Remus will be able to collect Black."

"How will we find you?" Harry asked, intrigued at the idea of seeing where Dae lived.

"I'll send French," Dae told him. "But the invitation is only open to you, Remus, and Cordie."

Harry shook his head. "I think everyone should be there who was involved today. Luna, Lucy, Hermione, and Justin, who is my best friend and Cordie's son, all live in my house or sort of live there, and so it's only fair they should have a say in the matter about Sirius."

"Fine," Dae agreed to Harry's demand, as all those except for Justin were already aware of who Dae was.

"I'd also like to tell Hannah, Justin's girlfriend," Harry told Dae.

"Don't you understand the concept of secrecy, Harry?" Dae asked, shaking his head in consternation.

"I do but even though she doesn't actually live there, Hannah spends a lot of time in my house, so she needs to know," Harry countered.

"You can tell her then," Dae finally relented, although begrudgingly. "But at this rate half of Hogwarts will know."

"None of my friends will say anything," Harry promised, smiling at Dae's rather grumpy visage. "I suppose I had better be off."

"Can you side-apparate?" Dae asked, wondering if Harry could manage Remus.

"I've done it plenty of times," Harry told him, having practiced the maneuver with Tonks during his training.

"Then take Remus, and get back to school," Dae said, holding out his hand, and returning Harry's smile. "Thank you for your help today, Harry. I couldn't have done this without you."

A rather flattered Harry shook hands. "Thank you for sending French to me. Without your warning we never would have realized in time that Sirius was innocent." The mention of time made Harry remember that he had a deadline, and he therefore looked at his watch, his eyes widening with panic. "We've been longer than I thought. I've got less than ten minutes to get back!"

"Then get out of here," Dae urged.

Harry replaced both his and Remus' invisibility spells and apparated away, reappearing just behind the Shrieking Shack. Checking the time again, he noted that he had now had just over eight minutes to get back to the library. "I'm never going to do it."

"Harry, is that you?" a voice hissed out of the darkness of the woods.

"Yes," Harry dropped his invisibility spell, recognizing Lucy's voice. "Is Hermione back?"

"I'm here," Hermione said, walking out from behind the trees.

"What happened?" Lucy asked. "Where's Remus?"

"Unconscious at my feet." Harry dropped the recently renewed spell off Remus. "We ran into some trouble."

"Did Dae and Sirius get out?" Hermione asked worriedly, hoping this had not all been for nothing.

"Yes, Dae's taken him back to his place." Harry checked his watch. "And we now have six minutes; we aren't going to make it."

"That's why you had me as backup," Lucy said. "And I took the precaution of bringing these." Lucy held out two broomsticks. "But you'd better take mine. It's faster." Lucy thrust her Firebolt at Harry. "I'll get Remus back inside." She then cast yet another invisibility spell on the two children, and her precious broomstick.

Harry wished she had waited to cast the spell until Hermione was behind him, but he had no time to argue, instead saying, "Get on, Hermione, and make it quick."

Hermione took a few moments to work out where Harry and the broomstick were situated, but soon she was perched behind Harry. "I'm on."

Harry could feel Hermione leaning against him but she was far from secure. "You'd better wrap your arms tightly around my waist." And once Hermione had done as he suggested, Harry shot forward, calling out behind him, "And for goodness sake, don't let go!"

The difference between this time and the time she had last been on the Firebolt with Harry was like night and day, and Hermione buried her face in Harry's back as the world became a blur around them. Harry shot up into the air as he came up to Hogwarts' gates, flying up and over them, the wards recognizing both him and Hermione, and the Aurors below having no idea that the two were above them.

Once inside, Harry flew even higher, and then dropping the broomstick into a steep descent, which made Hermione squeak with fear, he pushed it as fast as he could. He then yelled out a warning to Hermione, "Only the window above the doors is open, so I'm going to have to go in sideways."

Daring a peek just as they reached the doorway, Hermione wished she hadn't as Harry turned them sideways to fit through, and then just as quickly dipped down to avoid cannoning into the ceiling.

Unlike Hermione, Harry was getting a thrill from the exhilarating ride, and although no-one could see it, he was grinning madly as they shot up between the staircases. A quick assessment of the stairs' placement told Harry that he should exit on the third floor, which he did. A short trip later, and they had reached the door to the library on the fourth floor. Harry did not dare fly inside; he would have sent books flying at the speed he had been travelling at, and so he lowered the broomstick, and dismounted.

Hermione's legs were shaking as Harry helped her off the broomstick, checking the time. "We have one minute."

Glad to see that the doors to the library were open, the pair of them dashed inside, passing George as he got up from his seat. With just over thirty seconds to spare they reached the back of the library. Once behind the stacks, Harry removed the invisibility spell, and shrank the broomstick, before slipping it into his pocket. "I can't believe we did it."

Hermione could not help but grin at Harry, and now that they were safe, she wrapped him in her arms to hug him. "I was so worried about you."

"Well, I'm safe now." Harry hugged Hermione back, and was about to pull away when George rounded the corner.

"Hermione, I've found..." George's voice trailed off at the sight of his girlfriend in Harry's arms, their faces flushed and Harry's hair askew. "You bastard! The letter was right."

"George, it's not what..." Hermione didn't get a chance to finish her sentence as George, fed up of finding the two of them together in compromising situations, lost his temper and lashed out.

His back against the stacks, Harry was unable to get out of the way, and George's fist connected with his nose. Harry immediately went down, and Hermione dropped to her knees beside him. "Oh God, Harry!"

"It figures you'd care more about him," George sneered, before he turned on his heel and left.

On the floor, Harry touched his nose. "Ouch!"

"I'm so sorry," Hermione apologized.

"Not your fault." Harry wiped his bloody hand on his trousers. "Go after him."

Hermione went to leave but then she hesitated. "I can't, Harry."

Harry didn't understand why she had refused. "Why not?"

"Because something obviously went wrong at the Ministry, and this is the alibi we need," Hermione said logically. "If anyone asks, it will look as though we were here all the time."

Harry coughed and spat blood into a handkerchief. "But you know what George will think, Hermione. He's really upset."

"He'd be more upset if his girlfriend dies because it's discovered that she helped a convicted felon to escape," Hermione pointed out. "I'll try and come up with something later."

"But, Hermione..." Harry protested.

"It can wait, Harry," Hermione said firmly, as she helped Harry to his feet. "We should get you to Madam Pomfrey."

Everyone was staring at the pair of them as they walked through the library, Luna rushing over. "I saw George leave. What happened to you?"

"He hit me," Harry told her as they walked.

Luna glanced at Samantha, and she decided the best way to help the couple provide an alibi was to cause mischief. "Did George catch you two kissing or something? Because Harry's hair is all over the place, and it's entirely obvious that's what you were up to."

Samantha rose to her feet, a hurt look on her face. "You were kissing Hermione?"

Harry glared at Luna, who just looked innocently back at him, before denying the question. "Sammie, it isn't true."

George's reaction and Luna's words made Samantha think otherwise. "So why did George storm off, and why is your hair a mess?"

"George caught me hugging Harry," Hermione interjected before Harry could say anything. "I was excited about something that had gone right, and I hugged Harry without thinking. You know as well as I do that Harry's hair is always a mess, but it was enough to make George jump to the wrong conclusion."

Not wanting to believe that Harry would cheat on her, Samantha, who was used to seeing Harry hug both Hermione and Luna, took Hermione at her word. "In that case, you'd better tell George he got it wrong. He looked really upset."

"I think I should take Harry to see Madam Pomfrey first," Hermione decided, not sure yet what she was going to tell George.

"I'm coming as well," Samantha said, putting her arm around Harry's waist.

And not wanting to be left behind, Luna also accompanied them to the hospital wing.

It was not very long after they arrived that they had company.

Harry glanced over as Amelia walked in. "Hi."

"How did you get that?" Amelia asked immediately, her usually friendly attitude missing.

"He was kissing Hermione at the back of the library and George caught him, and hit him," Luna piped up before anyone could say anything.

Samantha was now beginning to get the feeling that Luna really did not like her dating Harry. She therefore turned to Amelia, and refuted Luna's claim. "Harry was not kissing Hermione; they were just hugging, Madam Bones."

"Solace, I want to see George Weasley," Amelia demanded of one of the Aurors escorting her.

Silence prevailed until George arrived, and he gave Harry, whose hand was being held by Samantha, a very dirty look, before addressing Amelia. "Is Dad alright, Madam Bones?"

"He's fine." Amelia's usual pleasantness had reasserted itself as she spoke to George. "Why did you hit Mr. Potter?"

"I caught Potter and my former girlfriend together," George snarled, making his feelings very clear. "So I hit him."

So far Luna's defense of Harry seemed to be true, but Amelia nevertheless continued with her questioning. "Where were they when this happened?"

"They went to the back of the library to get a book, and I found it before they did, so I went looking for them." George's voice was full of hurt. "And I found them together."

Amelia turned to Samantha. "Did you also witness this?"

Samantha shook her head. "Not the bit at the back of the library but I was there when they went looking for the book."

"And they didn't leave the library at all?" Amelia asked.

"They didn't have time," Samantha told her. "They'd only been gone for a few minutes when George went looking for them."

Amelia looked to George. "Do you concur with this, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes," George said, looking daggers at Harry.

Amelia decided she knew enough. "Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, Miss Graham-Lovegood, thank you. You may all go." Amelia then turned to Harry, who was still holding Samantha's hand ensuring that she was able to stay. Luna also wanted to stay but a look from Amelia sent her following George and Hermione out of the hospital ward.

Amelia sat down on the spare chair, her demeanor once again pleasant. "I owe you an apology, Harry."

"What for?" Harry winced as Madam Pomfrey used the Episkey spell to repair his nose.

"There's no easy way to say this," Amelia said apologetically, "but I believe someone tried to help Sirius Black escape from the Ministry today, and I have to be honest, I thought you had something to do with it."

Samantha was shocked. "Harry? Help Sirius Black?" She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Amelia had to admit she had been a little premature in her accusation. "I know it's ridiculous that I even entertained the idea that Harry might have helped but Harry's pass was used to access the Auror Security Office on the eighth level, and I also thought I saw Harry walking through the Atrium a few hours before the actual execution."

Hermione had said that they should use invisibility spells to enter the Ministry but she had been overruled as Albus had warned them about security wards at the entry routes. And so, with only enough polyjuice for Dae and Remus to use to take the Aurors' places, the four of them had tried to keep their heads down, but it was obvious that they had not been entirely successful. Harry kept his cool, and said, "But I was in school."

"I know that now," Amelia owned, before going on. "Harry, given that you obviously had nothing to do with this, do you know where your pass is?"

Harry nodded. "I always keep it in my book bag."

"Would you mind fetching it for me?" Amelia asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not at all."

After being escorted to his room in Hufflepuff, Harry checked through his bag, adopting a panicked tone as he spoke to Amelia. "It's gone."

Amelia was far from pleased with Harry's news. "Could you have dropped it?"

"I suppose I could have last week," Harry said, after pretending to think about things. "I slipped and my bag dropped open. I thought I'd picked everything up; I didn't realize I might have dropped my pass."

"I need to alter security procedures," Amelia sighed tiredly. "I sent Albus an owl to discuss it, but decided it would be far more expedient to come here and discuss it in person instead."

"So what do you think happened?" Harry hoped he had asked in an innocent enough voice.

Amelia now suspected she had seen Harry, but that it was someone polyjuiced as him. "I think that someone must have found your pass, polyjuiced themselves to look like you, and used the pass for their own ends."

Harry dropped down onto his bed, running a hand over his face. "I'm really sorry, Amelia." He then looked up. "Did whoever it was cause any trouble?"

"No, the procedure went as planned, and after being Kissed, Black was sent through the Death Arch." Amelia had been glad she had been there to bear witness to it. "But we found evidence that someone had accessed several rooms in the Department of Mysteries after the execution, and no-one should have been there. We think that whoever tried to help Black was shunted into these rooms, as obviously whoever took your pass would have been unable to use it properly, as the room would not have recognized their magical signature."

Harry was now thankful that he had resisted the temptation to use his pass. "So what made you think they had something to do with Black?"

"Two of our Aurors were found unconscious a short time after the execution, and they were the same two who supposedly witnessed and carried out the final part of the execution. On questioning them, they denied having witnessed the execution, and bearing that in mind, the two men who carried out the final part of the execution had to have been whoever was trying to help Black escape," Amelia told Harry.

Harry's stomach was bouncing around like a Mexican bean as he asked, "So if two people took over your Aurors, why did they not stop the execution; why carry it out?"

"Because there were too many Aurors and spectators in the Death Chamber," Amelia surmised, "as well as the fact that Albus was there, and they probably didn't want to challenge him."

"I wouldn't want to," Harry said truthfully.

"And I believe that whoever it was also had a bit of a shock," Amelia said. "I don't think they realized that the Kiss was going to be administered first, and one of them didn't take seeing the Kiss so well."

"Is it really that bad?" Samantha asked, curious as to what it must be like.

Like Albus, Amelia had seen someone kissed by a Dementor before. "It's awful." Amelia then turned as a tall, black man came through the dormitory door. "Yes, Auror Shacklebolt?"

"We've questioned all of the teachers. They don't know anything, but Professor Snape did report a theft of polyjuice potion from his store," Shacklebolt informed Amelia.

From this, Harry guessed that Lucy must have gotten Remus back safely and had somehow managed to revive him. "So whoever stole my pass must have taken it."

"It certainly explains how I saw you today," Amelia said, rubbing her neck tiredly. "That will be all, Shacklebolt."

As Shacklebolt left, Samantha excused herself and headed into Harry's bathroom while Amelia turned back to Harry. "Harry, I'll leave you be. When you return to BritAD in July I will need to issue you a new pass but this one will be keyed specifically to your wand."

"Thank you." Harry took the warm flannel that Samantha had gone into his bathroom to get and wiped his face clean of the dried blood, glad of the moment's respite from looking at Amelia. "I have to go to apologize to George."

Amelia smiled at Harry. "Kissing his girlfriend wasn't one of your best ideas."

Samantha rolled her eyes in frustration. "Hermione is Harry's friend, and they were only hugging."

"Whatever it was, I hope you sort things out, Miss Brown," Amelia responded politely, before addressing Harry more warmly. "I'll see you later in the year, Harry."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry said brightly, before collapsing back on the pillow the moment the door closed behind Amelia.

Samantha sat down beside him. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm okay," Harry said, sitting back up. "It was just a little intense."

"Well, I think..." Samantha stopped mid-sentence as the door opened and a boy she knew was named Ernie came in.

Harry got up off the bed. "Ernie, could you give us a minute?"

"Harry, she's a Ravenclaw," Ernie responded. "And she's in our room."

It had not occurred to either Samantha or Harry that now that Amelia had left, that perhaps Samantha should have gone as well. "Harry, I'd better go."

"I'll come with you," Harry said, picking up his cloak, and giving Samantha Justin's to wear. "Let's go down by the lake."

Samantha put on the cloak. "Thanks."

Neither of them said anything until they reached the lake, and Samantha shivered, pulling Justin's cloak more tightly around herself. "You wouldn't think it was May, would you?"

"Typical English weather," Harry responded automatically, his mind not really on the weather.

Samantha looked up ahead. "Isn't that Hermione?"

Samantha now had Harry's full attention and he began to walk more quickly. "Come on."

Hermione was in tears when they reached her. "George won't believe me, Harry."

"But it was just a hug," Harry protested. "I can't see why he's making such a big deal of this."

"Things haven't exactly been that good between us for a while," Hermione admitted, finally revealing what she had told Luna some time ago. "And this didn't help."

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized.

Hermione refused to let Harry take the blame. "It isn't your fault, Harry."

"But I feel as though it was," Harry came back. "We're going to find George and tell him that he's wrong."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think he'll listen."

Samantha agreed with Harry. "I think you should let Harry try."

"I can't think of anything that will change George's mind," Hermione said.

"I could tell him that he was right, but that I kissed you." Harry turned to Samantha. "If it's okay with you."

Samantha was far from thrilled with the idea, but she reluctantly agreed to go along with Harry's plan. "As long as it didn't happen, it is."

Hermione shook her head. "It really didn't. But Harry, if you do that, George will hate you, and I don't want that."

"Then nothing will have changed in that respect," Harry pointed out. "No matter what I do, he's going to hate me." He put his spare arm around her. "Come on, let's go find George."

"But..." Hermione tried to protest.

Harry, however, refused to listen. He blamed himself for staying behind, even though it had been a good thing in the end. But if he had left when he was supposed to have, Hermione would not now be in the position she was in. The trio headed indoors, and it was Harry who eventually tracked George down at the top of the Astronomy Tower. And it was he who approached the boy. "George, can I talk to you?"

"Fuck off," George responded rudely, his eyes reddened, showing how upset he was by what he believed Harry and Hermione had done.

Harry ignored George's response and told him the truth, "George, Hermione didn't kiss me."

"I saw the state of you, Potter" George said in disbelief. "Your hair was standing on end, and you both had red faces."

"My hair was standing on end because I'd run my hand through it," Harry blatantly told a lie, before telling yet another. "And Hermione's face was red from embarrassment."

"Don't lie." George turned away. "You were also in each other's arms."

"That's because..." Harry started.

He didn't get far because Hermione herself interrupted, not wanting Harry to lie for her. "Harry, stop it." She knelt down in front of George. "Harry is telling the truth about the fact that we didn't kiss today."

George shook his head. "I don't believe you. Just like I now don't believe you about the letter."

Hermione softened her voice. "George, the letter was true."

George's face turned ugly as his anger resurfaced at Hermione's confession. "I'm going to kill him."

Hermione immediately petrified George. "Sorry, but I want you to listen. The letter was telling the truth to a point. Harry didn't kiss me. I kissed him."

Harry tried to stop his friend from sabotaging her relationship. "Hermione!"

Hermione turned around. "Harry, thank you for trying to put this right but this is my mess. Do you think you and Samantha could leave?"

Harry glanced at George, whose face was red with anger. "Will you be okay?"

"George would never hurt me," Hermione said confidently. "Please go."

Harry had to trust in Hermione's belief, but he nevertheless told her where to find him if she needed him. "We'll go back down to the lake."

As they headed downstairs, Samantha asked, "What letter was George talking about?"

Harry found himself explaining about Hermione's accidental kiss after she had successfully apparated, and the anonymous letter that George had received.

Samantha was frowning by the time she reached the bottom of the Tower. "So she kissed you, but have you ever kissed her?"

Harry did not want to lie to his girlfriend, but he also did not want to tell her the truth, and so he chose a kiss that he believed would be the best to share. "Yes. When they found me in the Chamber beneath the school, but I was dating Ginny then, and in my dazed state I thought it was her."

Samantha was starting to feel a little unsure now, and she began to dig a little deeper. "And were there any other times?"

From Samantha's almost angry tone, Harry had a feeling that this wasn't going to bode well for him. "Yes. Our first kiss was with each other, but we were only kids at the time."

"Do you fancy her?" Samantha asked outright.

"I did," Harry admitted. "But she made it clear that she didn't feel the same way, so that's in the past."

Samantha looked back up the staircase to where she knew that things were probably about to end between George and Hermione, thus freeing Hermione up to pursue Harry if that was what she wanted. "Would you end your friendship with her if I asked you to?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Hermione is one of my best friends, but that's all she is."

"I need some time to think this over then," Samantha decided, and she walked off, leaving Harry standing alone.

Harry felt like banging his head up against the brick wall behind him in frustration that although Samantha had believed him in the library, George's words had made her reconsider.

Upstairs in the tower, only once Hermione was certain that Harry and Samantha had left did she release George. "I'm sorry to do that but I couldn't have you going after Harry when he's done nothing wrong."

George was still furious. "So what did I see in the library?"

"We just hugged, George," Hermione said in response, not being able to tell him the truth because of her promise to Dae.

"I don't believe you," George said angrily. "And you've proved what a barefaced liar you are by hiding the truth about the letter."

"It wasn't like the letter said," Hermione said quickly.

"Then what was it like?" George asked, crossing his arms.

Hermione explained what had happened. "I really didn't think. I was so pleased to have made the jump successfully, and just as I would with you, I threw my arms around Harry and kissed him."

George's face echoed his disbelief. "And you're telling me he didn't kiss you back?"

Hermione denied Harry had taken part in the kiss. "He did nothing."

George shook his head. "I still don't believe you."

"It's true," Hermione said desperately. "Look, George, I made a mistake, and I've felt awful ever since I did it. And I'm so very sorry that I've hurt you."

"But not sorry enough to want to spend time with me," George snapped. "Even though we're supposed to be back together, ever since we came back to school after Easter we've barely spent an hour alone. I thought that maybe it was because I frightened you with my marriage proposal, but now I think it's because you want to be with Potter."

"Your marriage proposal did scare me, George," Hermione admitted. "And it was because of that and everything else you wanted from me that I pushed you away, but it was not because of Harry."

"So you don't fancy Harry?" George asked bluntly.

Hermione's stomach lurched, and she told the truth. "I admit I do a little."

"I knew it," George said in an angry but almost triumphant sort of way.

"But you can't tell me that you don't fancy Susan, can you?" Hermione had caught George giving the redhead the occasional once over.

George reddened. "That's different. I haven't been snogging her."

"And Harry has not been snogging me!" Hermione retorted. "George, I care about you, and..."

"If you care about me, then tell me you love me," George demanded.

"Don't, George," Hermione begged, not wanting to rehash an old argument. "We went over this at Easter, and you know what I believe."

"That romantic love doesn't exist," George said scathingly. "Tell me, Hermione. Why the hell are you so frightened of loving someone, of contemplating the idea of getting married, and of having children?"

"Because children are a burden!" Hermione retorted, finally revealing her true feelings about having offspring.

George was shocked by Hermione's ferocity. "You can't really believe that."

"I do." Hermione could see he still didn't believe her, so she went on. "George, your parents went without so much to provide for you. My own mother gave up on continuing her education because of me, and Harry's mother had to die for him."

"My parents wanted all of us children," George countered. "Mum always says that we're a blessing. And I'm sure your mother would not give you up even if she could turn the clock back, and, as for Harry's mother, any decent mother would die for her children."

"They're all valid points, George, but it still doesn't change how I feel. Children are not what I want from life." Hermione tried to make George understand. "I want to travel, to go to a wizarding university, to get a good job, and to make a difference."

"You could have made a difference as a mother and my wife," George argued.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I couldn't."

"So that's why you refused to marry me when you leave school?" George again brought up the proposal he had made at Easter.

"I really do care about you, George," Hermione tried to explain her feelings. "But I'm not ready to say that I'll marry you, and I'm definitely sure that even when I am ready to settle down, I won't want children."

"And I know that I do." George loved being part of a large family unit. "I've always wanted a big family."

"But I don't want that. I don't think I ever will," Hermione said, her voice catching.

Notwithstanding the mess with Harry, George knew then that it was over between him and Hermione. "Then perhaps it was a good thing that I found that out now, rather than wasting any more time on this relationship."

Hermione brushed away the first of many tears that would trickle down her cheeks. "I'm really sorry, George." She slipped off the promise ring he had given her after their reconciliation, and handed it over to him.

After shoving it in his pocket, George headed for the door, but before he left he turned around, the need to hurt Hermione very much evident as he said, "Feel free to pant after Potter. But I doubt he'll dump his girlfriend for you. She's far prettier than you, she's a pureblood, she's probably not frigid, and I'm almost willing to bet she'll be willing to commit to him, unlike you."

George then headed out of the astronomy tower, slamming the door to the room behind him.

At first Hermione sat stunned at his words, and then she slowly got up, opened the door and headed down the stairs.

Down by the lake Harry saw her coming from a distance, and he quickly closed the gap. Her face said everything, and Harry held out his arms. "I'm really sorry, Hermione."

Hermione didn't speak. Instead she went into Harry's arms and wept.

Next Chapter: Cordelia learns the truth about Sirius; The Sorting Hat is called into service; Dae reveals something of great importance.

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Chapter 52: Horcrux!

The Next Day

A tired and red-eyed Hermione met up with Harry outside the Great Hall. "Where did you tell Sammie you were going today?"

"I didn't. She wants a little time out from me after yesterday," Harry said, having received a brief and to the point note from his girlfriend that morning.

Hermione immediately apologized. "I'm so sorry, Harry. This is all my fault."

"No, it isn't," Harry denied her words. "I'm the one who offered to try and help you and George."

"I think you might have done better just to let nature take its course," Hermione said, sniffing. "It was over the moment he saw us in the library." She glanced around her as it occurred to her that they should not have been alone. "Where are the others?"

Harry started walking as he told her. "They've gone ahead, but I said I'd wait for you."

"Thanks." Hermione smiled tremulously at how nice Harry was being.

Harry ended up holding her as she started to cry again. "Do you want to stay behind?"

Hermione lifted her head, shaking it as she did so. "No, and I'm sorry to keep crying over you."

"You can cry on me as much as you want to," Harry offered, and then he slipped his arm around Hermione's shoulders, leading her down towards the gates. "Do you want to talk about George?"

Hermione had not wanted to the day before, but now she nodded. "If you want to listen to me bleat on."

"It's what friends do," Harry said, giving Hermione's shoulder a squeeze. "Tell me."

"I've already told you about the whole marriage proposal fiasco," Hermione said, leaning into Harry's side, taking comfort from his holding her. "And although I could legally wed when I turn sixteen in September, the idea of it makes me break out in hives."

"Not literally, I hope," Harry cut in.

"No, but you know what I mean," Hermione said, half-smiling, before she became glum again. "There's too much I want to do, Harry. I want to travel; I want to go to University, maybe Muggle, maybe magical, even both; and I want a career."

Harry had heard all of this before, but he knew that Hermione needed to talk, and so he encouraged her to go on. "And you didn't like the idea of living with the Weasleys, did you?"

Hermione shook her head, and gave Harry a small smile. "I love living at Potter Place, and as nice as the Burrow is, I couldn't ever imagine living there."

"You can live at Potter Place for as long as you want," Harry offered, wanting to make Hermione feel secure, "even until you're two hundred!"

Hermione gave a small laugh. "I think your wife, when you get one, would get fed up of seeing me."

"Tough," Harry responded with a smile. "You came first."

Both children nodded politely as they reached the gates and passed by the Aurors on duty. Once she got outside, Hermione started talking again. "Harry, after yesterday, I don't think George is ever going to speak to you again."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure I'll manage."

"But what about Charlie?" Hermione brought up something Harry had not thought about. "This could make things difficult between the two of you."

"I'll manage," Harry repeated, but his face showed his concern.

"I'll talk to Charlie if there's a problem," Hermione offered. "It's the least I can do after what you did for me. I'll also talk to Sammie if you want me to."

Harry shook his head. "If she wants to be with me, then it has to be her own choice, and she has to trust me."

Hermione could see though that it was bothering Harry. "I'm sure she'll come around." She gave a gentle smile. "I mean you're the Boy Who Lived, who wouldn't want you?"

"There are plenty of people," Harry remarked lightly. "You included but for some reason George couldn't see that."

Hermione's smile vanished as she thought about what her former boyfriend had said to her. "He thinks I fancy you and that's why I wouldn't marry him, and..."

Harry stopped walking when he realized that Hermione had started crying again. "Hermione, what is it?"

"He said even if you broke up with Sammie, you'd never want someone like me," Hermione blurted out. "Because I'm not a pureblood or pretty, and because he thinks I'm f...f...frigid."

Harry felt angry at George for his rather harsh words, and Harry therefore refuted everything George had said to Hermione. "Hermione, George is an idiot, and doesn't know anything about what I want. I think that you're really pretty, and if you were my girlfriend I wouldn't care even if you were a Muggle. And I don't believe for a minute that you're frigid."

"But I hate kissing!" Hermione howled. "And I hate George touching me."

Harry experienced a moment of shock at Hermione's words especially when he considered the brief but intense kisses he and Hermione had shared, and so he came up with the only answer he could think of. "Perhaps it's just George who makes you feel that way."

As Harry stroked her hair, Hermione looked up at him, tears running down her cheeks. "But what if it's not?"

Harry brought up the kiss that Hermione had given him when she had been learning to apparate. "Please don't take this the wrong way but it felt as though you didn't hate it when you kissed me that day in the alleyway."

Hermione hiccupped as she tried to get her breath, and through her tears she admitted the truth that she had previously shared with Luna and Hannah. "I didn't hate it."

"And neither did I," Harry revealed, before gently saying, "Hermione, I think you're brilliant, and no matter what George said, if I wasn't dating Sammie, I would go out with you in a heartbeat."

Harry's soft and reassuring words made Hermione cry even harder, and she stayed in the safety and comfort of Harry's arms for quite some time, until she felt able to control her emotions. Then she squeezed Harry tightly. "Thank you, Harry. I don't know what I would do without you."

Harry hugged his friend back just as tightly. "I know you would do the same for me." When she pulled free, Harry brought up the reason why they were outside of Hogwarts in the first place. "I have the co-ordinates for apparition to Dae's place. Do you still feel up to going? We don't have to go if you'd rather not. Remus knows what needs to be said."

"I want to go and meet the infamous Sirius Black," Hermione said, wiping her eyes. She was hoping that talking about Sirius would help to take her mind off George and her problems.

Harry could see though that despite Hermione's attempt to deal with her current situation, she was far from being herself. He therefore made an offer he would not normally have made given Hermione's own ability. "Do you want to tidy yourself up, and afterwards I'll side-apparate you?"

Harry had been right about Hermione's emotional state, and although she felt a little pathetic relying so heavily on Harry, Hermione did not trust herself to make the jump successfully. She therefore nodded gratefully. "Please."

After Hermione had cast several cosmetic spells to hide the fact she had been crying, Harry slid his arms around Hermione's waist. "Are you ready?"

Hermione nodded, and she laid her head on Harry's chest. "Yes."

Neither of them had spotted the girl watching from a distance. Samantha felt her stomach lurch in dismay at how tenderly Harry was treating Hermione. As she continued to watch, she realized that the letter she had sent Harry would force him to choose between her and Hermione, and Samantha had the feeling that she would lose Harry if she failed to recant her words. Not wanting to lose him to Hermione, Samantha decided that when Harry came back later that day she would talk to him and apologize. Her mind made up, Samantha turned away, missing the couple vanishing.

When they reappeared, Harry found himself strangely reluctant to release Hermione, and as he did so, he checked to see how she was faring, "Are you okay?"

Feeling bereft now that Harry had released her, Hermione nodded. "Yes. Harry, I..."

Dae came over, interrupting whatever Hermione was about to say. "Harry, Hermione. Welcome to my home. Come in."

Hermione stayed close to Harry's side, following him into the large sitting room. Harry looked around in amazement at all the glass that made up the wall opposite the entrance. On the other side of the glass he could see manicured lawns, several small ponds, and a couple of fountains. "Wow!"

Dae smiled at him. "It is rather spectacular, isn't it? But I can't take the credit as the previous owners did all of the work."

Hermione was rather impressed, and she stood and stared into the distance. "How far back does it go?"

"I own about forty acres," Dae said in a proud but not arrogant voice.

At the sound of Justin calling to him, Harry tore his gaze away from the view to find that only Lucy, Justin, Hannah, and Luna were in the room. Harry said hello before asking, "Where's Remus?"

"In with Black," Dae informed him. "Then he's leaving to get your friend."

Remus came out of a door on the far wall a few moments later, his eyes puffy and a little red. "I'll be back shortly."

Moments later the door opened yet again, and a dark-haired man sporting a goatee and a moustache came in. He too had obviously been crying. He headed towards the group, Harry obviously his target. "Harry!"

Harry found himself being hugged rather firmly. When he was released, he smiled a little uncertainly. "Hello."

Sirius wiped his once again wet eyes. "You really do look like James, except for the eyes and the lack of glasses, of course."

"I wear contacts," Harry said automatically.

"It suits you," Sirius said, standing staring at Harry's face.

Harry shifted under Sirius' scrutiny, and not really knowing what to say, he apologized for what had happened at Hogwarts. "I'm sorry that I tried to kill you."

Sirius surprised him by barking out a deep but pleasant laugh. "You almost succeeded as well. That was some spell you cast. Let's sit down where we can talk in comfort."

As Sirius steered Harry over towards the sofa, Dae headed over to the drinks cabinet. "Can I make anyone a drink?"

"When I came to last night, I could have sworn you were talking to a house-elf. Why isn't he doing that?" Sirius asked, sitting down and pulling Harry down with him.

"French has other duties to attend to," Dae remarked. "So what's your poison?"

Sirius opted for a firewhiskey, but Lucy refused anything. All five children had juice of one sort or another. Dae handed out the drinks, and then fixed himself a scotch. Hearing a crack he turned around. "Remus, you're just in time for..." Dae stopped speaking as his glass slipped from his fingers.

Remus could feel shock reverberating from his friend. "Dae?"

Dae was glad his glasses were unbreakable, and so he reached down, picking up the one he had dropped, and vanishing the spilt scotch and ice. "Sorry about that."

Remus walked over, his arm around Cordelia's waist. "Are you okay? You've gone white."

"I think the last few days are catching up with me," Dae said, brushing off Remus' concern. He bowed his head slightly at Cordelia. "I'm Dae Venant."

"Cordelia Graham," Cordelia said, smiling. "Although in a few days' time it's going to Lupin."

"Congratulations," Dae responded politely, before turning back to the cabinet. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water, please," Cordelia said, and Remus opted for the same.

Once Dae had poured out the water for the couple and himself another scotch, he too headed to sit down, noting that Remus kept his arm around Cordelia. "Ms. Graham, has anyone explained yet why you're here?"

Cordelia shook her head. "Remus didn't say in his letter what this was about. I simply received a cryptic note saying to be ready for noon, and to find someone to take care of Dudley."

Sirius spoke up. "It's because of me."

Cordelia turned her attention to him. "I'm sorry. We haven't been formally introduced. I'm Cordelia Graham."

Remus filled in the blank. "Cordie, this is Sirius Black."

Cordelia paled, not having connected this well-dressed and handsome man with the one from the Muggle and magical newspapers. Then she remembered the Daily Prophet report she had read that very morning. "But that's impossible; he was executed yesterday."

Harry shook his head. "Everyone thinks he was but we rescued him."

Cordelia blinked several times before calmly asking, "And who is we?"

Harry told her who had taken part in the rescue. "But Lucy and Luna stayed behind."

Cordelia twisted in Remus' arms to stare at him, and Remus knew he was in trouble. "You're mad, aren't you?"

"Mad is an understatement, Remus," Cordelia snapped. "You took Harry and Hermione into the Ministry of Magic to rescue a killer?"

"Sirius was innocent, Cordie," Harry blurted out. "And I wanted to help him."

"I don't care if he was innocent," Cordelia said, anger tightening her features. "Remus, you had no right to drag the children into a situation where they could have been hurt."

"That's what Sirius said when he found out," Dae interjected, rubbing his nose. "He hit me."

"Good!" Cordelia snarled. "Because you deserved it." She tugged free of Remus' grasp and stood up. "I thought you were someone I could trust, but now I'm not so sure."

Harry also got up. "Cordie, Remus didn't make us do it, but it was the right thing to do. And we were only there to open a door, and to turn back time."

"Open a door? Turn back time?" Cordelia asked in complete confusion.

This led to Harry explaining about his pass, and Hermione explaining how she had managed to finish all the courses during her fourth year that she had missed from her third year. "... and they couldn't have done it without the time-turner that I had been using for my extra lessons because it was keyed to me, and so I had to go along."

"But they were supposed to have left as soon as they had done their part," Remus said, also rising to his feet.

Cordelia picked up on the 'supposed' element in Remus' statement. "They didn't leave?"

"Hermione did, but I stayed," Harry admitted. "I was frightened that something would go wrong, and Remus and Dae might need my help."

Cordelia caught the look that passed between Dae and Remus. "Don't tell me. Something went wrong, didn't it?"

Dae nodded. "Big time wrong. If Harry hadn't come back for us, Remus, Sirius, and I would have all died, or at the very least we'd have been caught and probably executed eventually."

Suddenly Cordelia's legs turned to jelly, and she turned a frightened face to look up at Remus. "Is this true?"

Remus nodded. "Yes. And it would have been my fault if it had happened. I've never been in such close quarters to a Dementor before, and I reacted badly to it. I ended up collapsing."

"Are you alright now?" Cordelia asked worriedly, her initial anger fading somewhat under her concern.

"I had some awful nightmares about being tortured last night." Remus shivered as he thought about them. "So I didn't get much sleep, but I'm feeling a little better this morning."

Cordelia was rather disturbed by Remus' tale. "You dreamt you were being tortured?"

Remus nodded, but not wanting to discuss what he had dreamed about the night before in front of Dae, he said, "I'll tell you about the dreams later. But I think they stem from my collapse yesterday."

"So where did you collapse?" Luna asked, wanting to know more. Yesterday the only conversation she had had with Harry had been a dressing down about her behavior in the library. "I'm guessing from what I saw in the pensieve that you were obviously the Auror who looked ill. And I know you must have gotten out of the Death Chamber but how did you get out after that? Did Dae help you? And how did Harry find you?"

"Slow down, Luna," Dae interrupted before Luna could rattle off any more questions. "To save time and to stop everyone from asking random questions and making things confusing, I think we should start at the beginning."

So Remus began at the start, telling Cordelia, Justin, and Hannah about how they had discovered Sirius' innocence, both in relation to the Potters' deaths, and to those of the Dursleys. Then he handed over to Harry, who spoke about his part in the rescue, explaining what he had done up until the point he had sent Hermione off. "I don't know what happened to Remus and Dae though after they left us."

Dae took up the reins. "Everything was going well. We had overcome the Aurors who were supposed to be in the Chamber for the execution, and we had acquired their wands and passes. We even managed to get through that strange room at the end of the corridor without a problem by touching someone else. In fact I thought it was all going to go smoothly until they brought the Dementor out."

Remus broke in. "Well, not smoothly exactly. I did think Sirius was going to give the game away when I whispered to him not to be afraid, and I identified myself. He made me jump when he yelled my name out loud."

"After you'd just told me to go to hell, it was a bit of shock to find you polyjuiced as an Auror and telling me you were going to save me," Sirius said in his defense.

"It's just like we heard in the memory," Luna chimed in excitedly.

"Exactly the same," Remus confirmed. "But as Dae said, it all went wrong when the Dementor came out. I became dizzy, and started sweating. It was all I could do to hold myself upright, and so Dae moved to steady me, and that was when the Dementor attacked Sirius."

Sirius shuddered at the memory. "Like Remus, I also don't do well around Dementors, and I was unable to change into my Animagus form and so I collapsed. That was the last thing I remembered until I awoke here."

"I have to be honest; I was also struggling a little in the Dementor's presence, and so with Remus almost fainting, and Sirius collapsing, everything seemed to be falling apart." Dae had truly thought they were going to fail at that point.

"But you used the Patronus charm, didn't you?" Luna said, recalling Remus' memory. "That was the bright flash we saw."

"It was," Dae said, glad that no-one had witnessed his Patronus. If they had, Dae would have had some difficult questions to answer. "And mercifully the Patronus worked and the Dementor glided away, and so I hauled Remus up, put invisibility and featherlight spells on Sirius, and threw Harry's cloak over him as an extra safety measure."

Remus took over when Dae stopped speaking. "Dae thankfully dealt with getting Sirius onto his shoulder. I could barely hold myself up, and I was terrified that I would keel over there and then, but thankfully I didn't. I managed to straighten up as the screen was taken away, and we were then dismissed. We only got as far as the spinning room when I finally succumbed."

Aware that Remus would be unable to tell them what had happened after that, Dae yet again took over the storytelling. "When Remus collapsed, I managed to hold onto him and Sirius as the spinning room catapulted us into a side room, and I was trying to figure out what to do next when thankfully Harry arrived."

Harry recognized that this was his cue and he continued where Dae had left off. "After I sent Hermione off, I waited until the execution time had passed, and because no-one had come by me to head to

the floos to leave, I went searching. I eventually found Dae in the Hall of Prophecies, and together we got Remus and Sirius out and back into the main building. Once there, we managed to get to the second level and into an empty room. But then alarms started going off, and Dae said the place had gone into lockdown."

"And so how did you get out?" Cordelia asked, feeling tense and nervous even though Harry and Remus were now safe.

Dae filled her in about their close call. "If Harry had not been there, I would never have thought of using the air vents, and it would have all been over."

"Dae did offer to sacrifice himself though," Harry said, going on to reveal what Dae had intended to do to try and save him and the others.

Sirius looked over at the dark-haired man who had helped to rescue him. "You didn't mention that."

Dae shrugged. "I didn't think it was important."

"Thank you, Mr. Venant," Cordelia said gratefully. "Knowing that you were willing to do such a thing for Harry and Remus means a great deal to me." She then moved to hug Hermione before doing the same to Harry. "You little idiots."

Harry could feel wet running down his cheek, and he guessed that Cordelia was crying. "I'm sorry but we couldn't let Sirius die when he was innocent."

"And you did the right thing." Cordelia pulled back, revealing that she was indeed in tears. "And I'm sorry I got mad, but I don't ever want to hear about either of you doing anything like this again."

"You sound just like Charlie," Harry remarked, and then his face fell.

Remus picked up on Harry's despair straightaway. "Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Harry said, not meeting Remus' eyes.

Hermione told him instead. "He's worried that Charlie is going to be angry with him."

"Why?" Cordelia asked.

Hermione shook her head, tears starting to fall, and Harry moved to comfort her again. Holding Hermione in his arms, Harry related to everyone who didn't know what had happened in the library with George and Hermione. "And so I have the feeling that Charlie won't be too happy with me when he finds out."

Dae sighed heavily, and resignedly said, "You can tell George what happened, Hermione."

Hermione lifted her head up and shook it. "I'd like to but after the way he spoke to me yesterday, I'm not entirely sure that I would trust George to keep quiet. I also think he'd believe that it was something we'd made up."

"Not if he sees me he won't," Sirius suggested.

Hermione again shook her head. "Don't risk your safety for me; my relationship with George can't be saved, and I don't want it to be. But I think Harry should tell Charlie the truth."

Harry thought about it for a moment before he too shook his head. "Dae was right about not telling too many people, and while I would trust Charlie with my life, I don't think it's fair to involve him in this. I feel bad enough having to drag Cordelia, Justin, and Hannah into this."

"So why did you?" Hannah asked curiously, although she was glad to have been told what had happened.

"I've offered to let Sirius stay at Potter Place, and as you're all linked to or live in my home so I thought it only fair you know," Harry explained.

Hannah shrugged. "I'm okay with it." Justin agreed with his girlfriend.

Cordelia, however, glanced over at Sirius, before responding. "Harry, it's your home, and you can ask whoever you want to stay there."

"I still want your permission," Harry said. "It's also your home now."

Harry's comment made Cordelia realize something. "What about Dudley?"

Harry grimaced. "As much as he really should know, I don't think it's a good idea to tell Dudley who Sirius is, especially as Sirius did kill Dudley's parents, even though he was forced to do it."

"I agree," Cordelia said, and she spun around to address Sirius. "I'm happy for you to stay at Potter Place, but if you accept Harry's offer, you can't tell Dudley you're Sirius Black."

"But won't he recognize him?" Luna asked, pointing out a flaw in Cordelia's statement.

Cordelia shook her head. "No. I didn't make the connection between Sirius and the man I'd seen in the newspapers and neither will Dudley."

"Then I think an alias is in order," Dae suggested.

Sirius wracked his brains for a moment, and then came up with a name for himself, something he would feel comfortable with. "How about Simon White?"

"Nice name," Luna said, liking it. "You look like a Simon."

"I'd rather look like a Sirius," Sirius remarked. "But beggars can't be choosers."

Now that was sorted, Cordelia decided it was time to go. "Remus, I think we should head home and get our new guest settled in. I don't want Dudley left alone in the library for too long." At such short notice, Cordelia had been unable to get a babysitter, and Dudley had promised that he would remain inside the library until Cordelia came to get him.

"I'm going to come with you," Lucy said, getting up. "I can go and collect Dudley, and you can have a talk with Remus before we have to head back to school."

Remus helped Cordelia up, and he shook hands with Dae. "I'll take Cordie. Lucy, if you could take Sirius, just to make sure that he's definitely through the wards, it would help tremendously."

Within a few moments, the four adults had vanished, leaving Dae alone with the five children. "Will you be alright apparating out?"

"Yes. But I'll have to take Justin and Hannah first, and then come back for Hermione," Harry said, grabbing Hannah's hand and disappearing with her.

Deciding to save Harry the bother, Dae appeared behind the Shrieking Shack with Justin, and then he and Harry returned, Harry moving to stand by Hermione. "I should have asked. Do you actually want me to side-apparate you again?"

Hermione decided that she did, and she glanced over at Luna who was staring almost wistfully at Dae. Hermione suspected her friend had found a new crush, and she gently said "Luna?"

Luna shook herself. "Yes?"

"Are you okay to apparate back to the Shrieking Shack alone?" Hermione asked.

"I can apparate you if you're not," Harry offered.

Even though Harry had been rather severe the previous evening when he had been taking her to task, Luna knew then that Harry's words about always being her friend even when she did mess up had been true, and she smiled appreciatively at him. "Thanks, Harry, but I'll be okay." She then vanished with a rather loud crack.

Satisfied that Luna had apparated out safely, Harry turned to shake Dae's hand. "Thank you for taking care of my godfather."

Dae released Harry's hand. "It was my pleasure." He then made a request of Harry. "Harry, I would like to get together again soon."

"Of course. How about dinner?" Harry offered, not realizing that Dae's request did not stem from a wish to socialize. "But it will have to wait until after Remus and Cordelia return from honeymoon in two

weeks' time. They're getting married on Thursday, and we don't get home from school until Wednesday evening."

"I was thinking of earlier than that, but I suppose that will have to do," Dae decided. "I'll owl you to set something up."

Hermione had the feeling that it was something more than dinner that Dae was after. "Is this about Sirius?"

"I'll talk more about it when we meet," Dae responded cryptically. "Take care apparating back."

Only once Harry and Hermione had left did Dae make his way back to the drinks cabinet. Once there, he poured himself a very large scotch, knocking it back in one go before throwing the glass into the wall, cursing when it simply bounced off.

July 21st 1995

Albus looked at the instrument that had begun to chime. "It looks as though your mother is here, Justin."

Justin, who had arrived outside the school gates by portkey a short time earlier, released his grip on Hannah as soon as Cordelia came through the door, and he moved to hug his mother. "I've missed you, Mum."

"I've missed you as well, Justie." Cordelia used his pet name. "I hope you were good for Mr. and Mrs. Abbott."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Mum!"

Cordelia then asked the same of Harry, who had been staying with Samantha's family; an invitation that had arisen the same day as Samantha had spotted Harry and Hermione together. Wanting to make things right with his girlfriend, Harry had accepted, and so instead of going to Boston with Lucy and Dudley, he had spent two weeks with the Browns instead. "I'm the Boy Who Lived. I'm always good."

"Of course you are, Harry," Cordelia smiled before moving on to Luna and Hermione. "How was Ireland?"

"I really loved it," Hermione said brightly, having had a wonderful time.

Luna, however, pulled a face. "My cousins were okay but it wasn't the same as being with you."

"That's sweet of you to say so," Cordelia said, hugging Luna again. She then spotted Dudley, who had just arrived with Lucy. Cordelia walked over and drew him into an embrace, asking how he had gotten on. "Did you have a nice time with Lucy?"

"Yeah," Dudley said, shrugging and trying to act cool. "It was alright."

Albus could see, however, that the boy was tense, and he therefore smiled brightly at him as he walked over to greet him. "Mr. Dursley, how nice to see you again."

"Um, yeah," Dudley said as he shook Albus' hand.

Harry then greeted his cousin in a similar manner. "Dudley."

Dudley surprised everyone by shaking Harry's hand, and giving his cousin a rare smile. "Hi, Harry."

Harry turned to face the others. "You do remember everyone, don't you, Dudley?"

"Yeah," Dudley said yet again. He had met Hermione and Justin when Minerva had been killed, and had only met Hannah and Luna at the wedding two weeks earlier. For some reason Luna made him feel uncomfortable, and he greeted her with a reserved, 'hi'.

Dudley's discomfiture grew when, instead of simply saying 'hi' back, Luna marched over and pulled Dudley into a hug. "Hello again, Dudley."

When Luna released him Dudley couldn't help but stare in stunned amazement at the strangely dressed girl, Luna having chosen to wear a bright pink top and a clashing green skirt. "Yeah, hello."

Dudley then fell silent for a moment, before noticing something that made him forget he was so nervous. "What is that bird?"

"Fawkes is a phoenix." Albus went over to the bird, stroking its brightly colored head. "He's been my companion for a long time now."

"He's kind of cool," Dudley admitted, relaxing a little more, before jumping and pointing to an instrument on the table that had suddenly pinged. "What's that?"

"It's how I know that someone is coming up the stairs," Albus explained, and he tapped it to silence it. "And right now it's telling me that another of my guests is on his way up."

Dae entered the room to find all eyes on him. "Good evening." After greeting everyone, he immediately grabbed Lucy's arm and dragged her to one side. "What's he doing here?"

Lucy tugged her arm free. "Dudley has been staying with me, and so whatever you're going to be discussing tonight will be including him."

"Why don't we just invite the whole of Hogwarts?" Dae hissed at the young woman.

"It's one boy, so get over it," Lucy snapped, and she then changed the subject as she realized something. "Where's Sirius?"

"Simon," Dae said in a sarcastic voice to remind Lucy of what she should be calling Sirius in front of Dudley who, as Cordelia had expected, had failed to recognize the man who had tried to kill him, "is going to be coming as soon as he finishes handing in his paperwork to take his final exam."

"Final exam?" Lucy exclaimed, completely lost by the comment.

Keeping his voice low so that it would not carry, Dae relayed what Sirius had told him when Dae had dropped by to see him a few days after Remus' wedding to check on how Sirius was coping. "He said he was training to become a healer before everything went wrong and that he wants to go back into the same profession. But under the circumstances, it will have to be as a Muggle doctor, and so he's

been using some sort of accelerated learning spell in order to learn what he needs to take the Muggle exams."

"I could do with a spell like that myself," Lucy said, more than a little miffed at Sirius' obviously illegal shortcut.

"You're not trying to build a new life. He is," Dae pointed out. "And I've therefore agreed to help him to sort out a viable background so that he can begin practicing."

Lucy pulled a face. "With such little experience, I'm still not sure that I'd want him as a doctor."

Dae scowled at Lucy. "I wouldn't be helping him if I thought he'd be endangering anyone."

Lucy still was not convinced. "How do you know he won't be?"

"You really know nothing about training as a healer, do you?" Dae responded to Lucy's question in an irritated voice. "Human physiology is the same no matter if you're a healer or a Muggle doctor. And as part of his healer's apprenticeship, Sirius was meeting with Poppy Pomfrey during his sixth and seventh years, and then he spent his time split between studying and training in pediatric magic until he was arrested. He's already completed all the Muggle exams or their magical equivalents except for the final Muggle one, and that is at the end of August. And given that he's passed all of his exams so far with flying colors, I think he's more than capable of handling the job!"

Lucy could tell that she had hit some sort of nerve with Dae, but she didn't understand why. "Fine. So he's going to be a wonderful doctor."

Their hushed conversation came to an end as Cordelia, who had been talking quietly to Albus, suddenly barked out, "Dudley, don't touch the sword."

Wondering how Cordelia could have known what he was doing since she had had her back to him, a red-faced Dudley pulled his hand back. "I just wanted to see if it was real."

"It is, and I'm afraid you can only wield it if you're a Gryffindor," Albus said apologetically.

"How do you know if you're a Gryffindor?" Dudley asked, still interested in the sword.

"This hat," here Albus picked up the Sorting Hat, "is placed on your head during your first day as a student here. It decides what house you will go into."

"Can I try it?" Dudley immediately asked, his earlier nervousness now having evaporated. "I'd like to hold the sword."

"I'm not sure it will work for you," Albus warned him, but nevertheless he still placed the Hat on Dudley's head.

Dudley ripped it off seconds later, and looked inside it. "It spoke to me."

"It won't hurt you," Harry assured him. "Just think your thoughts to it."

Dudley replaced the Hat on his head, and a few moments later his face turned to one of disgust, and he scowled as the Hat called out "Hufflepuff". "I bet I can't try the sword now, can I?"

"I'm afraid not." Albus took back the Hat, and replaced it on the shelf. "But you do have the right to enter Hufflepuff house whenever you are in Hogwarts."

Dudley thought about what that meant. "Does that mean I can sleep there when Aunt Cordie and Uncle Remus live here?"

Albus was a little taken aback by the question, but given that Dudley had qualified as a Hufflepuff, Albus could see no reason to refuse his request. "I can arrange for a bed to be placed in Harry's dormitory if that is what you desire."

"Cool," Dudley said, and then he turned to Dae. "What house were you in?"

"I wasn't," Dae lied.

"Try the Hat on," Dudley urged, before remembering his manners when Cordelia glared at him. "Professor Dumbledore, can Mr..." Dudley struggled to remember Dae's last name.

"It's just Dae," Dae told him. "And I really don't need to try on the Hat."

"You're quite welcome to do so," Albus said, again removing the Hat from its resting place. He was rather interested to see what house the Hat would select for Dae.

With all eyes on him, and not wanting it to become a big deal, Dae found himself having to try on the Hat. He braced himself for the voice.

"Well, well," the Hat said in a sarcastic voice. "Who's been a naughty boy then?"

Dae scowled in his head. "Just scream out a house for everyone listening, and be done with it."

"Your manners are no better now than when I first sorted you," the Hat retorted. "And so I stand by my first choice of SLYTHERIN."

A somewhat disgruntled Dae tugged the hat off. "Any more takers?"

Hermione stunned everyone by stepping forward. "I know it's not usual, but could I be resorted?"

Albus stopped Dae from passing the Hat over. "You would need to have a very good reason, Miss Granger."

It had not occurred to Hermione that she would have to give grounds for her request. "I'd rather not say why."

"Then I'm afraid that I cannot allow a resorting," Albus refused apologetically.

Luna therefore told him what Hermione was refusing to. "Ever since George finished with her, she's been treated like a piranha in Gryffindor."

Hermione could not help but smile at Luna's mistake. "It's a pariah, Luna."

Albus was not quite so amused. "Is this true, Miss Granger?"

Hermione slowly nodded. "Yes, Sir."

Albus turned to Harry. "I know you were accidentally instrumental in Miss Granger's split from Mr. Weasley, and so have you had any trouble?"

Having had to put up with a minor spate of snide remarks before school ended, Harry was about to say no, and then changed his mind in the hope it might help Hermione's case. "A little. But it was mostly ridicule from the Slytherins, and a bit of cold shouldering from the Gryffindors. But I did hear a few Gryffindor girls being rude about Hermione."

"I think that mostly stemmed from jealousy because of who Harry is," Hermione pointed out.

Albus took the Hat from Dae. "Nevertheless, it is not acceptable behavior, and because this stems from something I asked you to do, first of all I would like to apologize for placing you in such a position."

Hermione had not expected to get an apology from the Headmaster. "I didn't have to say yes, so you don't have to apologize, Sir."

"I believe I do, and I am very sorry that the outcome for you has been so traumatic," Albus said, before offering over the Hat. "And under the circumstances, I am willing to grant your request."

Dudley interrupted. "What did she and Harry do to make that boy dump her?"

"That's personal," Harry said before anyone could say anything. "And it's between Hermione and myself."

Although he was still curious, Dudley backed off and fell silent as Hermione took the Hat.

Before placing it on her head, Hermione made a request of the Headmaster. "I don't want anyone to get into trouble because of this."

"I'm afraid I can't tolerate this sort of behavior," Albus said sternly. "But if you so wish, unless you have trouble in classes next term, I will reserve saying anything. Should anything happen in your classes though, then I will have little choice but to act."

"Thank you, Sir," Hermione said, and she then slipped on the Hat. After a brief and pleasant discussion with it, she was overjoyed when it called out 'Ravenclaw'.

Luna was also delighted, and she hugged Hermione. "You're going to be in my House."

"How about Aunt Cordie?" Dudley asked, as he realized that only his new guardian had not ever tried the Hat on. "You haven't tried the Hat on yet."

"No, thank you," Cordelia shook her head.

Albus smiled at her reticence. "It will be quite alright, Mrs. Lupin. As Mr. Dursley pointed out, you are the only one here without a house."

Before she could argue, a delighted Dudley took the Hat from Hermione and placed it a little haphazardly on Cordelia's head. "I hope you're a Hufflepuff as well."

Dudley was disappointed though, for just as Hermione had been, Cordelia found herself being sorted into Ravenclaw. "I've never thought of myself as clever."

"You shouldn't undervalue yourself," Remus interrupted, having come up the steps just in time to witness the Hat calling out 'Ravenclaw', the silenced alarm allowing him to arrive unnoticed.

Cordelia blushed as she turned around to face Remus, who had stopped off to drop some things in the new quarters he had been assigned. "Hello, Remus."

"Hello, Cordie," Remus said in a soft voice.

Justin coughed, feeling more than a little embarrassed that his mother and Remus were making cow eyes at each other when they had only just gotten back from honeymoon. "Are we going to do have dinner now?"

"We're just waiting on our final arrival," Albus reminded him. However, it wasn't too much longer before Sirius flooded in.

Once dinner was over, Dae got down to business. "I have something to tell you all; well, to show you actually."

Cordelia exchanged a puzzled glance with Remus. "What is it?"

"First of all, I want you to know that what I am about to share with you relates to my reasons for helping Simon." Dae knew that what he was about to do was taking a chance, but he did it anyway. "But before I tell you, you need to know that I have this."

Harry gulped as Dae rolled up his sleeve, but not believing Dae to be a threat, he made no move to pull out his wand. "No wonder the Hat put you in Slytherin."

"If you're a Death Eater, then why did you help me?" Sirius asked in surprise.

"Because it was the right thing to do," Dae said simply.

"But you're a Death Eater," Lucy accused, her tone acrimonious. Unlike all of the others, she had drawn her wand.

"Actually I'm a former Death Eater who would prefer to forget his past, but unfortunately what I am doing now does not allow me to do so." Dae moved his hand towards his pocket, making Lucy twitchy. "Don't get so jumpy, Red. I just want to get something out of my pocket."

"Nice and slow," Lucy warned him, now trusting him even less than she already did.

Not wanting Lucy to attack him, Dae slowly reached inside his pocket, and he pulled out a black velvet pouch, before gently placing it onto the table. "This is, I believe, a Horcrux that belongs to

Voldemort." Lucy and several of the others winced, making Dae roll his eyes. "It's just a name. Get used to hearing it."

Albus barely heard Dae's words after 'Voldemort', his concentration focused solely on the pouch. With a pounding heart, he used his wand to scan it. "Whatever is inside is soaked in Dark Magic."

"Do you want me to take the contents out?" Dae offered.

Albus was not about to take any chances. "Yes, I believe I would."

Dae therefore reached down and carefully removed the item that the pouch held, before placing it on the table. "I have been unable to open it."

"How do you know it's a Horcrux?" Albus asked, his voice a little hoarse as he stared down at the locket engraved with a large 'S'.

"Voldemort practically spelt it out, and he used French to hide it in a cavern. He then left, intending for French to die." Dae's face tightened as he recalled what had taken place. "However, French was able to return to me and tell me what had happened. Of course I took umbrage at Voldemort's use of my house-elf in such a manner, and so I stole the locket and replaced it with a replica."

Hermione waited for Dae to finish talking before she asked about what Dae had said about the locket. "What's a Horcrux?"

Dae filled her in. "It's a vessel designed to hold a fractured piece of a soul, created when you murder someone in a terrible fashion."

"But why would You..." Justin stopped and revised what he had been about to say, copying Dae's own example, "why would Voldemort make one?"

"So that he can't die." Albus said in a stunned voice, sinking back into his chair. "I half-suspected this but I couldn't bring myself to believe that even he would do this."

"He did, and he has," Dae said bluntly. "I also tracked down a diadem but I managed to destroy that Horcrux a few years ago by using Fiendfyre."

Remus was quite horrified. "You used Fiendfyre?"

"It's difficult to handle, I know," Dae admitted. "But the only way I could think of destroying the Horcrux was by melting Ravenclaw's Diadem."

Hermione was aghast as Dae identified the diadem in more detail. "You melted Ravenclaw's Diadem?"

"It could never be used again, except for nefarious purposes," Dae said, not regretting his decision even for a moment.

Harry had a good question. "Why didn't you use the same technique on the locket?"

"Using something as dangerous as Fiendfyre would always be my last choice, and I still hope to save the locket," Dae responded. "I just hope that whatever is inside the locket is the Horcrux and not the locket itself. However, because it is in our possession now, the locket is not my main concern. My main concern is that there are more Horcruxes out there."

"Voldemort created more than two?" Albus was now more than horror-struck.

"From his boasting, I think he planned to create six, but I can't be certain, having only managed to obtain the locket and the diadem so far," Dae responded.

Albus was reeling. "I never believed it possible; a seven way split of a soul. But the fact that Voldemort has made more than one split would certainly explain the way he looked the last time I saw him. I just wish I knew if there was more."

So did Dae. "I've spent years trying to discover what else he might have used. I've mostly been concentrating on items that had belonged to the Founders."

"Have you tracked down Slytherin's ring?" Remus asked, recalling one of the more famous items.

Dae had not. "I thought the same, but I'm not certain that even Voldemort would bastardize another object belonging to his ancestor."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Albus decided, his head still spinning from what he had just learnt. "But why focus on the Founders' items?"

"After finding the locket, I suspected that maybe Voldemort was using other things that had belonged to the Founders, and I therefore began to backtrack to where I knew Voldemort had been at one time or another," Dae said, not bothering to go into more detail than that. "I did manage to track down a lead on Hufflepuff's Cup, and I believe that Voldemort gave it to Bellatrix Lestrange to take care of, but as to where it is now, I have no idea."

"I'd hide it in my vault at Gringotts," Sirius said. "Where better?"

"I've already thought of that," Dae informed him. "And if it is there, then it's impossible to get hold of. Now Bellatrix is dead, Draco Malfoy is heir to the Lestrange estate, and I doubt he'll hand the Cup over if it is in the vault."

"I may have a contact who can confirm whether the Cup is indeed in the Lestrange vault," Albus revealed.

"Then I'm glad I told you what I know," Dae said. "But can your contact obtain the Cup if it is there?"

"I don't know, and I'll have to get back to you when I've spoken to them," Albus said, before returning to the subject of the diadem. "Right now though I'm rather curious as to how you managed to find something that was supposed to have been lost to the mists of time."

"And it was lost for a very long time," Dae acknowledged. "But with the help of French and the Hogwarts house-elves, I managed to gain access to the grounds of the school to speak to the Grey Lady. She told me that she had spoken to Voldemort as a schoolboy. She actually described him as quite charming."

"Not a word I would associate with Voldemort," Remus remarked.

"Even so, he managed to extract from Ravenclaw the story of her daughter, Helena, who stole the diadem and hid it in Albania," Dae said. "To cut a long story short, I managed to divine from retracing Voldemort's footsteps that he traveled to Albania after leaving school. I also know for certain that he managed to find the diadem before returning here to hide it."

"When he came about the teaching position!" Albus immediately deduced. "Where did he hide it?"

"I would never have found it without the Hogwarts' house-elves' help," Dae acknowledged. "There's a room here in Hogwarts called the Room of Requirement. It apparently becomes whatever the occupier of the room requires. Voldemort required a safe hiding place for the diadem and so the room created a jumble of items in which to secret the diadem. Unluckily for him he must have thought he was the only one who knew where it was located, and so he placed no protection charms on the diadem, which allowed the house-elves to locate it for me."

"Why did they not tell me about this?" Albus demanded to know.

"French swore them to secrecy and made the house-elf pledge that I wanted the diadem in order to destroy the Horcrux that I believed lay within," Dae explained. "If I was wrong, then I swore to hand the diadem over to the proper authorities. Unfortunately, that was not the case, and I had to destroy it."

Hermione was still appalled by what Dae had done. "But how could you tell it was a Horcrux?"

"A simple spell," Dae said casually, before revealing that it had actually been a little tougher than that. "Well, using the spell itself is simple. Tracking it down took me almost five years, and it was another two years after that before I finally felt comfortable enough to use Fiendfyre to destroy the diadem." He glanced at Albus. "And now the only Founders' item I need to see, apart from Slytherin's Ring, is the Sword of Gryffindor."

"I have a feeling that you were so enthusiastic about the meeting being held here rather than at Harry's home," Albus noted, "because I own the sword."

Dae acknowledged Albus was correct. "Yes, and I'm hoping that the sword hasn't been tainted. If you would allow me to cast the discovery spell, I'll be able to tell you for certain."

"I believe I would have felt something malevolent from it before now if it was tainted," Albus said, but he acquiesced to Dae's request anyway. "But we had better be certain."

The group left the private sitting room and entered Albus' office where he asked Remus to remove the sword from its place on the wall. Dae then told him to place it on the floor in the center of them. "Nobody should get too close. The reaction I got when I cast this spell on the diadem was a thick treacle-like substance leaving it momentarily, before receding back inside."

Everyone did as Dae asked, and then they waited in anticipation as Dae cast the spell. "Scelus Anima Exorius."

Nobody expected what happened next, as Harry dropped to the floor and began screaming, holding his head.

Next Chapter: Dudley learns the truth about Sirius; Remus tells the others about his nightmare; Harry has a tough decision to make.

Note: I won't be updating next week nor will I be responding to reviews because I am having surgery tomorrow. However, normal service should hopefully resume after 2 to 3 weeks.

Chapter 53: Uncovering the Past

As Harry crashed to the ground, Hermione called out his name in panic. "Harry!"

"No!" Dae grabbed Hermione as she went to kneel by Harry. "Keep away from him."

Everyone backed off, but it was difficult to simply stand by and watch Harry suffer. What was even harder was witnessing a vile brown treacle-like substance ooze from his forehead before receding back in.

Moments after it did so, Harry's screams died to a whimper, and then there was silence. Dae nodded. "You can touch him now."

Hermione immediately dropped to her knees, stroking Harry's hair. "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and groaned, "That hurt."

In tears Hermione turned to look up at Albus. "He's a Horcrux, isn't he?"

Albus slowly nodded. "It would appear so."

Cordelia helped Hermione get Harry to his feet. "How did this happen?"

Remus proffered up a guess. "Something must have happened when Voldemort tried to kill him. Somehow Lily Potter's death at Voldemort's hands must have triggered this."

Albus disagreed. "Lily was killed by a simple killing curse. A Horcrux is the product of something much more sinister."

Hermione had an idea of what it could be. "Harry said that his brother vanished that night. What if..." Here she broke off and looked at Harry. "Sorry, Harry." Then she continued. "What if his body was torn apart just like Voldemort's and it was this that created the Horcrux. It would have been a terrible and violent death."

Albus had to admit that Hermione had offered up an excellent hypothesis. "I do believe you may be right, Miss Granger. Our problem now though is how to get the soul portion out of Harry." He addressed Dae, who had turned pale. "You are our only expert on this subject."

"You can't get it out without destroying or damaging the vessel," Dae said reluctantly. "To be rid of the fragment, Harry would have to be ripped apart or killed."

"You're not laying a single finger on him," Cordelia said, pulling Harry against her in a defensive motion.

"I wouldn't dream of hurting him, Mrs. Lupin," Dae assured her. "I am simply laying out the problem that is before us."

Harry was relieved that Cordelia was holding him. He felt shaky enough, but learning that he would have to die to be free had made him feel positively dizzy. "If you have to kill me to get rid of the soul fragment, then how am I supposed to defeat Voldemort?"

Dae looked at Harry incredulously. "You defeat him?"

Harry dutifully repeated what he had learned in the Hall of Prophecies. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches Born to the woman who has thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies And the Dark Lord will mark the child as his equal, and he will have power the Dark Lord knows not And one must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives." Harry grimaced as he finished. "But to kill him I'm guessing that I'm going to have to destroy his Horcruxes first, which means I need to get this fragment out of me."

"I've spent years researching them, and I haven't found a way of removing a fragment that doesn't damage the vessel," Dae said regretfully. "It's why I'm hoping that the fragment in the locket is inside of it, and not part of it."

"Perhaps there's another way," Remus said, as he recalled Petunia's words. "Harry's aunt told us..."

Albus interrupted. "Remus, we agreed that she was insane."

"I don't think so," Remus said softly. "Not anymore."

Dudley was completely bewildered by Albus' comment. "What are you talking about? Mum was not mad."

Everyone had almost forgotten that Dudley was there, and it was Lucy who moved to put a comforting arm around the boy. "We thought she was because of something she said. She told the Headmaster that she was once an immortal being, that she believed she was going to die, and that she knew about some things from another world that could help Harry in his fight against Voldemort."

"And as you might gather, we thought she had become a little disturbed," Remus added.

Despite his distress Dudley had to admit that it did sound rather whacked out. "So was she mad or not?"

"I initially thought so," Remus said honestly, before continuing. "But in the last few weeks, I've started to think that she might have actually been telling the truth."

Albus shook his head in disbelief. "Remus, you can't be serious."

Remus was. "Ever since that day at the Ministry, I've been having a nightmare that recurs again and again, and it seems so real."

"Just because it seems real does not make it so," Albus said, still not willing to believe that what Petunia had said might be true.

"And I've also had a dream that is no nightmare, but it does involve Thomas Seville," Remus also revealed.

"You saw his picture in the paper," Albus reminded him. "And the strain of what has happened is probably playing on your mind."

Remus frowned as he sensed Albus' reticence to talk about the matter. "Why don't you want to discuss this?"

"Because it's not healthy for Mr. Dursley," a concerned Albus said, indicating the confused boy who was still being held by Lucy.

"Then, after I've shown everyone my nightmare and my dream, if we all agree that they are just products of my imagination, I'll drop the subject," Remus promised. "But if not, then I want to pursue the Four Pillars."

"Four Pillars?" Hermione chimed in.

"I'll explain more if necessary," Remus said, before turning back to Albus. "May I borrow your pensieve?"

Wanting to clear this matter up once and for all, Albus immediately agreed to the request and ushered everyone back into his private rooms.

Remus then withdrew his memories and placed them in the pensieve. "The first memory is frankly quite disturbing, and I'm not sure if the children should view it."

"I've just had part of Voldemort's soul try to climb out of my head!" Harry retorted. "I'm going to see it."

One by one everyone agreed with Harry, including Dudley, and so they entered the pensieve, where Albus started Remus' first memory.

Remus' Nightmare

Remus tugged against the chains as the man in the silver mask walked over to him again. "Please, no more."

"Admit you slept with Mione," the man said, "and it will all end."

Remus shook his head. "But I didn't. I swear I didn't."

"Then we start again," the man said.

Remus had never known such pain as the liquid the man dripped onto his chest seemed to eat away at the cuts that had already been inflicted. And even if he had wanted to admit to what the man believed he had done, the pain had now grown so bad that Remus could no longer speak, and his tormented screams echoed around the chamber.

Remus' torturer obviously realized that Remus would be unable to talk in the state he was in and therefore another liquid, obviously some sort of neutralizer, was dropped onto Remus' chest. Remus took in huge lungfuls of air as the pain eased off, and he tearfully pleaded. "Please stop."

"You mean you don't want to go again?" the man asked, his tone making it sound as if he was asking Remus to tea, and not torturing him.

Remus sobbed as he shook his head. "No."

"Then tell the truth," he demanded.

"I didn't sleep with her," Remus wept, unable to control his tears. "I swear I didn't do it."

"I'm afraid that's not the answer I was looking for," the man said, approaching Remus again.

This time Remus began screaming before the liquid even touched him, and moments after the liquid was applied, he passed out from the pain.

Current time

Everyone was rather pale and still after the memory ended, and Dae was staring in shock at Remus as he connected the dots. "You're a werewolf?"

Remus had forgotten what he would be revealing by showing the memory. "Yes. Is it a problem?"

His mother's insanity almost forgotten in the light of the revelation, an excited Dudley jumped in before Dae could answer. "That's wicked. Do you really change on the full moon?"

"Yes, Dudley, I do," Remus said to the boy. "But I take every precaution to ensure that I cannot hurt anyone." He glanced back at Dae. "So, is it a problem?"

"No," Dae assured him, but it was still apparent that the truth had unnerved him somewhat.

When the two fell silent, Albus rubbed his beard. "I don't see how this memory gives credence to Petunia's words, Remus. You know how silver nitrate works on a werewolf's body, and it seems to be that fear that is driving your nightmare."

"I would normally agree with you, Albus," Remus responded. "But the second memory you're about to see made me view the nightmare in a different light."

"Then let's see it," Albus said, and he began the memory. But he ended up halting it almost the moment it had started as Hermione gave a shocked gasp. "Miss Granger, what is wrong?"

"This is almost like a celebrity list of Wizinging Who's Who," Hermione announced in excitement. "That man there is Professor Van Allen; he's one of the most brilliant wizinging historians ever, and she's Helena Compton, the renowned ancient monuments expert."

"I recognized them as well," Remus said, smiling at Hermione's enthusiasm.

"This still doesn't mean that Petunia was right," Albus interjected. "A dream where you include famous people is hardly telling."

"But it was his inclusion," Remus pointed across the room in one direction before pointing to the opposite corner of room, "and hers over there."

The group first gathered around the man Remus had pointed out, and Luna gave a romantic sigh. "He looks like a model off Wizinging GQ or Witch Weekly."

"He gets his looks from his mother." Remus pointed over to a beautiful black haired witch in the corner of the room. "That's her."

Albus was still unconvinced. "You saw the newspaper article, and no doubt you followed up on it."

"I admit I did some research," Remus said, having found out more about the Thomas Seville of their world during his honeymoon, Cordelia aiding him in his research. "But the nightmare and the dream seem too real not to be true."

"Remus, I think..." Albus began, only to stop speaking at Hermione's intake of breath.

Everyone turned to look at Hermione, who had focused her attention on the other person that Remus had pointed out. "Oh my God! It's her."

"Her?" Harry questioned Hermione's comment.

Hermione nodded slowly, unable to tear her eyes away from the frozen image of the woman. "She's the woman I saw in the Mirror of Erised, the one who looked a little like me."

"What's the Mirror of Erised?" Dudley asked.

"It shows your heart's desire," Albus explained, but he spoke in a distracted voice, his concentration now mostly upon Hermione. "You're sure it's the woman from your vision?"

Hermione nodded jerkily. "Yes."

"Would you mind sharing your vision with us?" Remus asked, hoping to get some backing for his own argument.

Hermione shook her head. "No, of course not."

Hermione's memory was extracted and Albus let it run until the image of a woman appeared in the mirror that a much younger Hermione was staring at, and then he froze the memory. A shaky sounding Hermione pointed at the woman. "See, it is her."

Albus performed a nifty little trick with the memories, and they soon hovered side by side. "That's impossible."

"It's definitely her," Remus said, almost unable to believe what he was seeing, even though this was the result he had hoped for. "But Hermione's vision is obviously not from the same night of my dream since the woman in her vision is wearing a wedding gown."

"How can this be?" Hermione asked, her voice strangled. "And who is she?"

Remus relayed what Petunia had told him. "If I'm right, her name is Mione Dominic, and she's the Mione the Death Eater in my nightmare was talking about. But in this world Petunia said that she's you."

"This world?" Hermione echoed, recalling Lucy's earlier comment.

"I think we had better leave the pensieve and I'll explain," Albus said, and the group withdrew and gathered in front of the fireplace.

Hermione discovered that she was shaking, and she was grateful for Harry's touch as he slipped his hand into hers. "So what did Petunia tell you, Professor?"

Albus glanced at Dudley. "I think maybe Mr. Dursley..."

"No!" Dudley almost yelled. "If this is something to do with my Mum, then I want to know."

"I think then that maybe it's time Dudley learned the truth about everything," Sirius said, deciding that it was unfair to leave the boy out, "including me."

"If you're sure," Albus said.

Sirius nodded. "I am."

Dudley sat in shocked silence as Albus began his story, covering everything of import, including Sirius' innocence, what Sirius had been forced to do, Petunia's claims, that Sirius was Harry's godfather, and Sirius' rescue. Only once Albus was finished, did Dudley finally say something. "So Simon really killed my Mum and Dad?"

"It's Sirius," Sirius said. "And yes, I did."

No-one was surprised when Dudley hit Sirius, who made no move to defend himself, and he was sent staggering backwards. Rather than hitting Sirius again as everyone expected, Dudley instead started

crying. Cordelia immediately moved to comfort him, and Dudley went willingly into her arms. Everyone remained silent as Dudley wept. When he began to quiet, Cordelia set him slightly apart from her so that she could look at him. "Dudley, you do understand that Sirius had no choice in the matter, don't you?"

"I don't believe you," Dudley snarled, his face full of hatred for Sirius. "He wanted to get back at my parents because they were mean to Harry when he was growing up, and he used this pretend Imperial magic so that he could kill them and no-one would hate him for it."

Hermione defended Sirius. "Dudley, the Imperius is not pretend. You really don't have any choice in the matter since the magic breaks down your natural reserves."

Still upset, Dudley refused to believe the girl. "No magic can do that."

"He needs to see what the Imperius curse does," Sirius spoke up before anyone else could jump in to defend him. And even though he knew it was a rather extreme measure, and that it was going to hurt like a bitch, Sirius pulled out a knife from his boot, placing it in Remus' hand. "Remus is my best friend, and he would never hurt me. But I am going to place the Imperius curse on him and he is going to have no choice but to stab me with that knife."

"He could just be acting," Dudley snapped, not really understanding how the curse worked.

Albus interrupted. "Do you really think this is a good idea?"

"Yes," Sirius said determinedly. "If I am going to be around, then Dudley needs to understand why I did what I did. I don't want him to be afraid that I'm going to hurt him the moment he turns his back on me."

Being aware that Dudley probably knew him the best out of everyone there, Harry offered to help. "Dudley, if I agreed to take Remus' place, would you think I was acting?"

Dudley knew how squeamish Harry was, and he could still remember how upset his cousin had been when Petunia had killed a skinny mouse that Harry had been keeping as a pet. He could also

recall Harry letting out moths and wasps rather than harming them, and he therefore knew that Harry would never hurt anyone if he could help it. "No."

"Then I'll do it," Harry said, and he held out his hand. "Give me the knife, Remus."

Remus reluctantly handed it over. "If you do this, then you do it to me, and not Sirius." He held up his hand to Cordelia, who was about to say something. "No, Cordie. We have to do this, and it will hurt me far less than Sirius." He turned back to Harry. "I'm ready."

Harry wiped his suddenly sweaty palm, and nodded at Sirius, his voice unsteady when he spoke. "So am I."

Sirius therefore turned his wand on Harry. "Imperio."

Harry felt as though he was floating, and he was vaguely aware of Sirius' voice telling him to drive the knife into Remus' shoulder. In a dream state, Harry found that he wanted to obey, but then commonsense kicked in. He didn't like hurting anything, let alone Remus, so why had he got a knife in his hand? Suddenly it was as if glass had shattered all around him, and Harry found himself standing staring at the others, the knife hanging limply in his hand. "What just happened?"

"You fought off the Imperius curse," Sirius said, his voice revealing how impressed he was. "How?"

"I just realized I didn't want to hurt anybody," Harry shared what he had experienced. "Is that why I beat it?"

"I think that is part of it but some people have a natural affinity for being able to resist the curse," Remus told him. "I believe that if you practice, you'd be able to throw the curse off every time."

Because Harry had failed, Dudley snorted, no longer believing in his cousin. "It's all acting."

"But it's not," Luna chimed in. "Tell him about the Imperius potion."

"We tested Sirius and found traces of Imperius potion in his blood," Albus explained to Dudley. "This potion is impossible to resist, unlike

the curse that Sirius put on Harry, which can be overcome if you are strong-willed enough, as Harry has just proved."

Dudley was still not swayed. "I don't believe you."

It was Cordelia who came up with the solution. "Then put the Imperius curse on Dudley and tell him to stab me."

Remus immediately stepped in. "Absolutely not."

Cordelia took the knife from Harry. "You said yourself we have to do this."

It was a different matter though now that it was Remus' wife who would be injured. "Cordie..."

"Remus, I'm doing this," Cordelia said firmly, before she rotated to face Dudley, handing the knife over. "Are you ready?"

Dudley swallowed hard as he looked down at the knife in his hand. He could see from Cordelia's face that she was serious about letting him hurt her, and he found himself thinking about everything she had done for him. Now he was horribly afraid that this woman who had done so much for him would be hurt if the curse really worked, and he therefore dropped the knife. "No, Aunt Cordie. You don't have to do it."

Sirius walked over to Dudley. "I swear I didn't really want to hurt your parents." He withdrew his wand, making Dudley recoil. "Wizards have an oath they can swear, which if we are lying, will strip us of our magic and kill us. I'm going to make that oath now."

Dudley was still uncertain whether to believe Sirius about anything, and he therefore turned to Cordelia, the only person he really trusted. "Is this true?"

"I don't know," Cordelia answered honestly. "But there must be a book somewhere that would tell us."

"I have one," Albus said, walking over to a built-in bookcase. Scanning it, he withdrew a book and handed it to Dudley. "There is a chapter in this on magical vows."

Dudley opened up the book and looked at the index, before turning to the correct page, his lips moving as he read the passage. When he had finished he closed the book and nodded. "If Sirius makes the vow, then I'll believe him."

At Dudley's words, Sirius used his wand to make the oath, before looking at Dudley with tears in his eyes. "I am truly sorry, Dudley. I tried my hardest not to do it, but I had no choice, and I couldn't fight it like Harry did."

"Who made you do it?" Dudley asked, his anger now being redirected at the unknown perpetrator of the scheme.

"I can't tell you," Sirius said regretfully.

Dudley persevered with his questions. "Why not?"

"We believe he was ordered not to by whoever sent him to kill your parents," Albus said in response. "And unfortunately Sirius will never be free of the Imperius potion until the person who did this is dead. What is worse is that we suspect it might have been Voldemort, or one of his Inner Circle."

Not having realized the far reaching effect of the potion, Harry paled at the implications. "You mean that whoever did this could tell Sirius to kill someone and he would still have to obey?"

Albus nodded. "Unfortunately, yes."

"That sucks," Dudley said, finally beginning to realize how awful the potion was.

"It does, but as I have promised Remus that I'll do my best to avoid facing You-Know-Who or any of his followers if I can, it should not be a problem," Sirius said, not wanting Dudley to think that he could still suddenly turn on him.

"I hope you kill them if you do," Dudley said fiercely, unaware that Sirius could not raise his wand against Tom. "And that you find the Four Pillows so that Harry can kill the bad guy."

"It's Pillars and the bad guy's name is Voldemort, a name that we should not be afraid to use," Albus corrected Dudley's mistake and backed up Dae's own philosophy on Voldemort's name.

Luna was more interested in the Pillars than she was in using Voldemort's correct name, and so she asked, "So do you think these Four Pillars can really help Harry?"

"I don't know if they can," Remus admitted. "But according to Petunia, whoever wields them has power over worlds. I therefore think that perhaps they could help somehow."

"So what exactly are they?" Hermione asked, harking back to her earlier question, Albus not having gone into detail during his explanation to Dudley.

Remus explained what Petunia had said about the Four Pillars. "And even though we know what the Fountain of Youth is, we know very little about the other two, and we have no idea where the ruby might be located."

"Well, wherever they are, I'll help to find them," Luna declared in a determined voice.

"And so will I," Dudley offered, wanting to help his cousin fight against the man who had been at the root of his parents' deaths. "I can use the internet."

"Internet?" Luna queried, wondering what it was.

Dudley began to explain to her about the internet, something he had only recently become aware of, only for Albus to interrupt him. "We should really try and work out what is going on. And we should start by reviewing the less disturbing of Remus' memories again."

Potter Place

The group had disbanded and left Albus just after midnight and returned to Potter Place, but no-one really felt like going to bed, and so Remus agreed to place his memories in Harry's pensieve so that they could continue to view them. And several hours later found

Hermione still standing in Harry's pensieve wandering around the frozen memory of the man whom her counterpart had supposedly married. "I really can't believe he's Voldemort."

"Our Voldemort certainly wasn't that hot," Luna said, also circling around.

"Our Voldemort didn't merge with Thomas Seville," Cordelia reminded the girl. "And make no mistake, if what Petunia said is true, then as good looking as he is, this man was an unprincipled killer."

"And apparently so was I," Sirius remarked, recalling what Albus had said about Petunia's warning. "What really gives me the creeps is that this other Sirius was supposed to have been a healer, just like me."

"I still wonder if Petunia made it up," Justin announced, still not wanting to believe that he might exist somewhere else. "This could all be just coincidence."

Hermione shook her head. "How do you explain that this is the woman from the Mirror of Erised? I couldn't see the man's face but from the back of Thomas Seville, I just know it's him."

"So your heart's desire is to be with Voldemort?" Dudley asked.

Hermione shuddered with disgust. "I would rather die."

Harry put his arm around her. "So why do you think you saw what you did?"

Hermione was at a loss to explain her vision. "I really don't know."

Dudley had an idea. "Perhaps our Hermione is from that world like Mum was, and that woman is really her. If Mum was supposed to be somebody else, then why couldn't Hermione be the same?"

Harry could feel Hermione shaking as he held her against his side. "Dudley, you're not helping!"

"But it could be true," Dudley persisted. "Hermione could be re..."
Dudley struggled for the word he was looking for.

Remus supplied it for him. "Reincarnated?"

Dudley nodded. "Yeah."

Cordelia walked away from the frozen image of the other world's Remus. "I suppose it could be true. It would certainly explain Remus' memories, and Hermione's vision."

Hermione felt sick. "But that would mean I was married to him!" Then she went red as she looked at Remus. "And to you." She looked back at the frozen image of Thomas Seville. "But why do I only remember her face and the back of him?"

"The memories are obviously repressed," Dae guessed.

"I'd rather they stay that way," Remus had to admit. "That nightmare I went through felt all too real and painful."

Hermione had a horrible thought, and she pointed at Thomas. "What if this is all true, and he's retained his memories?"

"Then we're in deep shit because he'll know everything about these Pillars," Dae said bluntly, before softening his response. "But I don't think he has. After watching this memory as many times as we have now, this man is very different from the Voldemort I knew. He's far more eloquent, smoother, and a great deal more in touch with the world around him. Our Voldemort should have been in Gryffindor; he doesn't necessarily think before he acts. This man, I'm willing to bet, thought about what he was going to do every single day of his life."

"Then I suppose we should be glad that we're not facing him," Harry said, finally really looking at Thomas Seville. There was something almost frighteningly familiar about him, and Harry had avoided looking at him too closely until then. "I just know he's ruthless."

Luna slipped her arm around Harry's waist, leaning against him. "You're afraid of him, aren't you?"

"Yes," Harry confessed, using his spare arm to hold Luna close to him, feeling safer with his two friends sandwiching him in the three-way hug. "But I don't know why."

"If Hermione and Remus have untapped memories of that world, then it stands to reason that you also probably do," Dae hypothesized. "And judging by what happened to the other Remus, this Thomas is not a nice man to cross, and you're picking up on that."

Dudley yawned, and Cordelia looked at her wristwatch. "It's three a.m., and we've been going around in circles for hours now. I suggest we all go to bed, and then reconvene tomorrow after breakfast."

The Next Morning

Cordelia and Lucy sat at the table with the children surrounding them. On the far side of the room, Dae, Remus, and Sirius watched the proceedings from the more comfortable sofa.

Although she was due to leave in a few hours to portkey to Sydney so that she could spend some time with her mother, Hermione had put off finishing her packing in order to attend the meeting to discuss what had happened. "So we should list what we know."

"We know that Thomas Seville in this world is not a bad guy," Justin offered up the first opinion, which Hermione duly wrote down on the parchment she had brought to the meeting with her.

"And we believe that Remus has memories from his counterpart in the other world," Cordelia made the second observation.

Dae also had an opinion to offer. "Both Remus and Hermione are aware of their counterparts, and judging by his reaction to Seville, Harry is probably also affected in the same way."

Going on his feelings about Thomas giving him the creeps, Harry suspected that Dae was right. However, he had a question. "So why can't I remember like Remus did?"

Sirius had a theory why. "Remus' nightmares only began after he rescued me. Perhaps the incident with the Dementor triggered his memories."

Harry was hardly impressed with Sirius' response. "So I'm going to have to go through a traumatic experience with a Dementor?"

Cordelia wasn't so sure. "I don't think so. Petunia Dursley's trigger was her imminent death, and even though she didn't know it at the time, Hermione's was obviously the Mirror of Erised. I therefore believe that a Dementor may have just been Remus' trigger, especially as Harry has already had a run-in with a Dementor, and he had no ill-effects from it."

Justin put his mother straight. "Actually he did. When it happened Harry was screaming about a woman. We believed he was going on about his mother, but after seeing Remus' memories, maybe not."

"Well, I can hardly go looking for a Dementor just to try and recall some memories that might not even exist," Harry quite rightly commented.

"How many of us do you suppose have these latent memories?" Hermione asked.

Cordelia knew that that was the same as asking 'how long is a piece of string'. "It could be three of you, or it could be all of us. But I have to admit that I had no feelings about anything I viewed."

One by one all of the others admitted the same, until they reached Lucy. "Seville gives me creeps, but whether that's just because I know he's V..Voldemort or because I have hidden memories, I don't know.

After Lucy finished, Cordelia summed things up. "In that case, I think that we can hopefully say that so far only Remus, Lucy, Harry, and Hermione are affected, and even then, Lucy and Harry might not be."

Justin snorted. "Harry's always at the center of everything. If anything, I'd say it's Harry fault that this is probably happening."

"Thanks," Harry said, pulling a face but aware that Justin had not meant it in a vindictive way. "So how do we bring mine, Lucy's, and Hermione's memories to the surface if they exist?"

"Well, as you've already pointed out, you can't go looking for a Dementor," Sirius said. "But your memories have been tweaked already, so perhaps they will surface when they're ready, just as Petunia's and Remus' did."

"So we can't do anything but wait until then," Hermione said in a disappointed tone, having wanted to get more quickly to the bottom of things.

"Well, we can start researching how to deal with Harry's Horcrux problem," Luna suggested, having spent half of the night awake worrying about it. "And start looking for these Four Pillars as backup."

"I can go to the library," Dudley reiterated his offer from the previous night.

"I'll go with you," Luna announced. "I want to see this internet thingy."

"Then I'll tackle the Potter library." Cordelia felt that her talents were best suited to reviewing books. "Harry, do you want to help?"

Harry shook his head. "I need to arrange to meet up with Sammie."

Dae immediately cautioned him. "I'm not sure it would be such a good idea to tell her about this, Harry."

Doing that was the last thing on Harry's mind. "I think I'm going to break off our relationship."

Cordelia was rather taken aback at Harry's statement, especially given that he had just spent a week with the girl and her family. "I thought you liked her, Harry."

"I do but with this thing in my head I don't have much to offer her," Harry said, his face grave. "I'm probably going to die, and I don't want to drag her into this."

Cordelia could see Harry's point, but she also did not want him to simply give up. "You can't put your life on hold for this, Harry. We will find an answer."

Harry was not so certain. "But what if we don't, Cordie? What if I'm doomed to die so that someone else can kill Voldemort?"

"You said yourself only you can do it," Dae reminded him of the prophecy he had been told the previous night. "So there must be some sort of answer out there."

Harry could not see what it might be. "But if you're wrong I'm afraid of what's inside me taking over somehow, maybe even infecting Sammie. She doesn't deserve that." He then turned and left the room.

"Luna, no," Cordelia said as Luna went to follow Harry. "I think he needs a little time to himself."

"Then I'll go help Hermione to finish packing," Luna decided, and she nodded to Hermione, who followed her out.

Two Days' Later

Harry closed the book he had been reading, and he turned to Luna. "I have to go out. I sent Sammie an owl saying I'd meet her now."

"Have you decided what to do?" Luna asked, hiding the fact that she hoped it would be to finish with the girl.

Harry nodded, but did not reveal what he was planning. "I'll see you later."

Luna scowled as Harry vanished before she could begin grilling him.

Samantha was waiting for Harry at the park entrance he had mentioned in his letter. "Hi, Harry."

Harry kissed Samantha's cheek when she turned her face towards him. "Sammie."

Samantha knew then that something was up, and she hazarded a guess at what it was. "You're breaking up with me, aren't you?"

Harry nodded sadly. "I'm sorry."

"But why?" a tearful Sammie asked. "Everything seemed okay a few days ago."

Harry knew he was going to hurt her with his words but after talking to Remus he had decided that a harsh white lie would make the break much easier. "I talked to Remus about his marriage to Cordelia and what it meant to him. And he said he could never imagine life without her. I therefore started questioning our relationship, and I realized that I could imagine life without you."

Samantha started to cry. "But I love you, Harry."

Harry's stomach lurched at the admission. He had had no idea that she felt that way, and this was making it even harder on him. However, Harry had no intention of dragging Samantha into his mess, and he strengthened his resolve and lied. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll ever feel that way about you."

"Is this because of Hermione?" Samantha asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Harry shook his head. "No, Sammie. There's no-one else."

"Then please, Harry," Samantha begged. "If you don't like somebody else, give us one more chance."

Harry refused outright, even though he wanted to say he was sorry, and that he wanted that chance as well. "It wouldn't be fair to you."

"I don't care," Samantha sobbed. "I just want to be with you."

"I'd just be using you," Harry lied. As she began to sob harder, Harry softened, and took the girl into his arms.

"Please, Harry," Samantha pleaded again. "I don't care."

Harry had never felt like such a bastard before, but he knew he would feel worse if something happened to Samantha because of what he carried inside of him, and so he stayed resolute. "You do, and you'd be even more hurt than you are now when I finish with you to go out with somebody else."

Samantha knew Harry was right, but it still hurt, and she clung to Harry as he held her while she cried. When she looked up, she was surprised to see that Harry had tears in his eyes. "You do care about me, don't you?"

Harry's voice was choked as he answered her. "Yes, and I feel terrible doing this to you."

"So why are you doing it?" Samantha demanded to know.

"Because it's not fair to tie you into a relationship that I don't think will go anywhere. And I don't want things to get to the stage where you'll hate me," Harry said, before giving a slightly rueful smile. "If you don't already."

Samantha wished she could hate Harry but it was impossible. "I don't. But you're still not going to change your mind, are you?"

Harry wanted to back off, and say 'yes,' but instead he stepped away from Samantha. "I really can't, Sammie."

"Then can we still be friends?" Samantha asked, not wanting to lose Harry out of her life entirely.

"If you think you can deal with it, then I would like that," Harry said honestly. "And if you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask."

"I need you," Samantha whispered, before she buried her face back in Harry's chest.

The two of them stood like that for some time until Samantha felt able to face the world again. "Would you apparate me home?"

Harry wrapped his arms around her, and they vanished.

Remus found Harry sitting in the conservatory, his face tearstained. "You did it, didn't you?"

Harry nodded, and wiped his face with his sleeve. "I felt awful doing it, Remus."

"Hurting someone you care about is always hard," Remus said, sitting down beside him.

"That must be why I feel like a complete git then," Harry commented, going on before Remus could respond. "I almost caved when she began to cry. I still keep thinking that I should go back and ask her to forgive me."

Remus could feel Harry's warring emotions. "Harry, can you honestly say that you want to go out with her knowing what you know about yourself?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to risk her safety, Remus."

"Then you did the only thing you could," Remus said. He then went on to reassure Harry that it would get better. "I've been in the same position, and..."

"How?" Harry interrupted before Remus could finish.

"I once dated a girl who I wanted to marry but I felt owed her the truth about me before I did," Remus said. "She handled it badly. In fact she tried to kill me, and so I had to obliviate her."

"And you ended the relationship because you knew you could never tell her, didn't you?" Harry deduced.

Remus acknowledged that Harry had guessed correctly. "I did, and although you feel terrible when you do it, believe me when I say that eventually you will stop feeling so shitty about what you've done."

Harry wondered how long the feeling would last. "How long did it take you?"

"Quite a while," Remus said, not putting a timescale on it. "But I did get over it."

At that moment Harry was not quite sure he believed Remus. "How do you stop yourself changing your mind?"

"You have to keep telling yourself that you'll only hurt that person more if you don't do this now," Remus told Harry how he had dealt with his own situation. "And you keep hoping that one day the right person will come along."

Harry gave a massive sigh. "But that won't happen for me. I can't risk dragging anyone else into my mess. I'd be too afraid of them getting hurt, just as I am with Sammie."

"We will find a way, Harry," Remus promised. "Wait and see."

BritAD - 31st July 1995

Harry found himself in a room with a man he had never met before, and he immediately moved to greet him. "Hello, I'm Harry Potter."

Frank eyed up the young man in front of him. "Frank Longbottom."

Harry had not made the connection, Neville having looked more like his mother. "I'm very sorry about Neville, Sir."

Frank accepted Harry's condolences. "Thank you." He knew little about Harry other than what his mother had told him and what he had read in the newspapers, but Augusta had told him that Neville had been acquainted with Harry. "So did you know Neville well?" Frank asked, trying to get a feel for Harry.

"Fairly well," Harry said, guessing that Frank was sizing him up. "He was best friends with Ron Weasley, who is dating one of my fellow Hufflepuffs, Susan Bones."

"So you know Amelia's niece?" Frank asked, not yet completely up-to-date with the ins and outs of the wizarding world as it stood.

"Yes," Harry said a little uncomfortably. "We used to date, but it didn't work out, and so now we're friends."

Any further discussion was cut off by Moody entering the room, something Harry was truly grateful for. However, it didn't stop Frank from resuming their discussion at the end of the day.

Harry groaned as he got to his feet for the final time that day. "Why did I ever agree to this?"

Moody laughed. "Because you're obviously a complete sucker for punishment." He turned to Frank and shook his hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, Frank."

Harry limped his way to the seat at the end of the dueling room and flopped onto it, burying his face in a towel. He looked up when Frank commented on how well he had done. "This isn't the first time I've had to do this but I'm out of practice."

"Likewise," Frank said smiling. He too hurt in places he didn't know he had, and was glad that Moody had chosen Harry for the final demonstration of the day. "But I have to be honest. Most fifteen year old boys would not be up for this, and most adults I know would run a mile at the thought of having to face up to You-Know-Who." He could see he had shocked Harry. "I know about the prophecy, Harry. It could have applied to Neville, and so Dumbledore informed Alice and me about it as well. However, we chose not to hide, and paid for it with years of a mindless existence."

Harry could hear the bitterness in Frank's voice. "Is there anything that can be done for your wife, Sir?"

Frank shook his head. "The potion Neville used to bring me back was a complicated one, and quite rare. It also requires the magical core of a wizard or witch. And although I would give my life for my wife in an instant, after what Neville sacrificed to bring me back, it would be wrong."

Harry now felt more than a little uncomfortable, especially as Frank had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"Thank you, and you can call me Frank," Frank offered as he straightened up, "as I have no doubt we'll be having a few more conversations over the course of the next few weeks."

"I look forward to it," Harry said, although he was not exactly being honest.

Frank laughed. "I doubt it but it was polite of you to say so."

Harry smiled. "I had better go, Sir."

Frank had the feeling that Harry would only call him Frank once he felt comfortable with him, something he obviously did not at that moment. "By the way, Happy Birthday, Harry."

"Thank you," Harry said, and he vanished.

Frank's mouth fell open. "Well, I'll be darned. The boy must have level one clearance." Picking up his things, he stiffly got to his feet and headed off towards where he could apparate home from.

11th August 1995

There was only a tired Harry sitting at the breakfast table when a very suntanned Hermione came bouncing in. "Hi, Harry."

"Hi," Harry said, lifting a hand.

Hermione scowled in annoyance at her friend. "After three weeks away, that's all I get?"

Harry struggled to his feet, wincing as he hugged Hermione. "It's wonderful to see you back."

"What's up with you?" Hermione asked, as she sat down.

"Moody and Dudley," Harry said grimacing. "Between them I've been thrown every which way but dead."

Hermione picked up a mug to pour herself a cup of tea into. "Why haven't you taken a potion?"

"I have," Harry retorted. "But it doesn't help much with my muscles."

"They just need to get used to being exercised," Hermione said, and then she realized what Harry had said. "Dudley?"

"He's taken up boxing, and I stupidly said I'd help him with his practice after class." Harry now thoroughly regretted his decision.

"But still," Hermione commented as she buttered a slice of toast, "Dudley's the last person I ever expected to hear you were

exercising with, especially after you've been going to BritAD every day."

"He kept teasing me about being scrawny, and saying that Voldemort wouldn't need magic to defeat me; he would simply only have to blow me over like a feather," Harry said brusquely.

Hermione realized this had hurt his vanity. "There's nothing wrong with exercising, Harry. It's just that I didn't expect you to be exercising with Dudley."

"No-one else is interested in helping him," Harry told her. "He asked Justin but he's more interested in chasing Hannah around the bedroom than he is in doing some useful exercise."

Hermione thought she noted a hint of resentment in Harry's voice. "Are you still upset over splitting up with Sammie?"

"A little," Harry admitted, and he gave a sad smile. "I miss having a girlfriend." He glanced over at Hermione. "You must know how it feels."

Hermione gave a small smile. "I do sometimes, especially when I want a cuddle."

"I miss that as well," Harry admitted, and he gave a rueful grin. "And the snogging."

This was something Hermione most definitely did not miss. "I can't say that I feel the same way."

Harry remembered the conversation they had had about the subject. "Sorry."

"It doesn't matter, Harry." Hermione then changed topic. "So, how are things going with the research for the Four Pillars?"

Harry guessed Hermione was embarrassed, and he therefore ran with the question. "We're no further along than when you left. You?"

Hermione became a little shamefaced. "Sorry, I didn't really have much time. Mummy was too busy arranging things for me to do."

Harry didn't want Hermione to feel guilty. "I'm glad. And I hope you had a good time."

"I did," Hermione said, relieved that Harry was not upset by her lack of progress. "And I have news. Mummy's leaving Australia."

The news certainly surprised Harry. "I thought she hated it here."

Hermione was under no illusions about her mother's feelings for England. "Aunt Jessica and Uncle Wayne are moving to Paris for Uncle Wayne's job, and Mummy doesn't see any reason to stay in Australia if they're not there. She's actually going to move to Paris with them."

At that moment Luna, Justin, and Dudley all came piling in, having been out to the supermarket to collect some bits and pieces for Cordelia. After hugging them, Hermione filled them in on her news.

"So have they found a house yet?" Luna asked with interest.

Hermione shook her head. "They're going to house hunt once they're over here, and catch the train to Paris from London, so that they can do some sightseeing here. In the meantime they'll be staying in a hotel."

Harry did the decent thing, although he and Virginia did not see eye to eye. "They could stay here until they find somewhere. But we'd have to hide anything magical because of your aunt and uncle."

Hermione was not convinced her mother would go for it, but she also wanted to ensure that Harry was not just being polite. "Harry, are you really sure about this?"

"How long would it be for?" Justin butted in, not entirely certain that he wanted Hermione's mother around. He had not been a fan of how she had treated Harry.

"Two or so weeks," Hermione said. "Nic, my cousin, is starting a private boarding school over here in September, but Debbie, his sister, wants to attend a finishing school just outside of Paris. They want to have found somewhere by then."

Justin guessed that Hermione's family must be fairly wealthy. "Are they rich?"

"They're moderately comfortable," Hermione told Justin. "Both Nic and Debbie attended a private school in Australia that is close to Sydney."

"So why is Nic attending school here in England rather than going to Paris?" Harry asked.

Hermione grimaced as she thought about her female cousin. "Probably because he wants a break from Debbie. The girl's a nightmare."

Luna was rather surprised by Hermione's vehemence. "What do you mean?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Debbie's a year older than me, and she's had more boyfriends than birthdays."

Justin grinned. "Is she pretty?"

Hermione had to admit that she was. "She's got blonde hair, perfect white teeth, and bright blue eyes, and she's tall and slim, so I'd say so." She scowled at Justin's delighted look. "You're with someone, remember!"

Justin was only teasing Hermione; he loved Hannah too much to even consider straying. "There's no harm in looking."

"Just be careful of her," Hermione warned. "She'd eat you for breakfast."

"What is Nic like?" Luna asked. "Is he like his sister?"

Hermione's face softened. "Nic's lovely." She then broke off as she realized something. "Harry, I've only just realized. Why are you here and not at BritAD?"

"Moody said I could end the course a day early," Harry yawned as he spoke, "seeing as it's his birthday." He scowled. "He didn't give me the same consideration." He then laid his head on the table. "Wake me up for dinner."

August 16th 1995

Harry heard the front door opening, and he stopped what he was doing and headed out into the hallway. He guessed the woman with Virginia must be her sister.

Virginia spotted him, and she headed over, her previous resentment of Harry having been mellowed by time. "Hello, Harry. Thank you for having us here."

Before Harry could respond, a voice screamed out. "Oh my God! It can't be you."

Harry glanced to his right to see a tall blonde haired girl with striking blue eyes, who he guessed must be Debbie, pushing past her mother. "I beg your pardon?"

Debbie drew closer. "My God, it is you!"

Hermione, who had just come in, stared at Debbie in disbelief. "You know Harry?"

"What self-respecting girl doesn't know Harry Potter?" Debbie asked the question as though it should be obvious. Then she turned to face Hermione, her tone quizzical. "But how do you know him?"

"Harry's my best friend, and this is his house," Hermione reminded her cousin of what she had already told her.

"When you said the guy's name was Harry, I never thought he would turn out to be Harry Potter," Debbie said, and stepping forward she looked more closely at Harry's forehead. "You are him, aren't you?"

Harry had a feeling that unless he showed her his scar this girl was unlikely to leave him alone, so he sighed and lifted his hair. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter, and no, it's no big deal. I'm just the same as any other boy."

Debbie had to disagree. "But you defeated Voldemort!" Unlike the British, Australians had no problem in using Voldemort's name.

Hermione was absolutely stunned by what this meant. "So you're a witch?"

Debbie nodded. "And if Harry Potter is your best friend, then you must be one as well."

The blonde boy, who had just come in, also did a double-take. "You've got to be kidding."

Debbie swung around. "It's him, Nic. The Harry Potter, and he's Hermie's best friend."

Nic glanced at his cousin. "So you're a witch?"

"Who's a witch?" A rotund balding man entered through the front door, lugging a large suitcase.

Jessica told her husband what he had missed. "Hermione's a witch."

"And he's the Harry Potter," Debbie said excitedly, pointing at Harry.

Harry wanted to run. Instead he smiled and lifted a hand, and said awkwardly, "Hi, everyone."

The rotund man dropped the case he was carrying, and walked over, his hand held out. "I'm Wayne Fuller, this is my wife Jessica, and our children, Nic and Debbie. I gather you're obviously Harry Potter."

"I am, Sir," Harry said politely as he shook the man's hand.

"Just call me Wayne," Wayne said, smiling from ear to ear. He winked at Harry. "Now I can see our Debs is excited about who you are, but I'd have been more excited if Hermie had mentioned that she knew you sooner. A portkey from Sydney would have been far more convenient than that dratted flight."

Harry decided that he liked Wayne, who didn't seem the least impressed by who Harry was. "At least you can portkey to Paris to check out properties."

Wayne's smile grew wider. "So I can, Harry."

"So how come none of you knew?" Dudley asked, finding it a little odd.

"Because I'm a Muggleborn," Hermione reminded him. "And we were told by Professor McGonagall to keep it a secret from other family members."

"So you're a Muggleborn as well?" Dudley asked Debbie, trying to get things straight.

"I'm not," Debbie responded. "Dad's a wizard but Mum is a Muggle."

"So you're a half-blood," Dudley surmised, Cordelia having explained the various bloodlines to him.

"Yes, and you?" Debbie asked.

"I'm a squib," Dudley announced unashamedly. "And Harry's cousin."

"And I'm Luna Lupin-Lovegood, and I'm a pureblood," Luna informed the girl before she could ask. "Although I don't care about blood purity."

"Neither do we, Luna," Nic quickly said, not wanting his sister to put forth her opinion as she normally would, "nor about magical ability."

This time, however, Debbie was far more interested in something else. "So, Harry, do you have a girlfriend?"

Harry remembered Hermione's warning, but he was also not going to lie. "Not right now."

Debbie's eyes lit up. "Perhaps we could get together sometime."

Again Nic stepped in. "Leave him alone, Debs."

Debbie stuck out her tongue at her brother. "Mind your own business, Nic."

Harry decided it was time to flee. "I'll help you take those cases upstairs, Dud."

Dudley let Harry take the two smaller ones. "Which rooms?"

"Debbie is in the Salon, and I'm moving into Luna's room," Hermione told him. Aware that Hermione had no wish to share with her cousin, Luna had offered to let Hermione share Luna's much bigger room. "And Nic, you'll have to bunk down with Dudley."

"Suits me," Nic said, smiling at the robust boy who had met them at the airport with Cordelia.

Cordelia then told everyone else where they would be staying, even though it probably meant nothing to Hermione's aunt and uncle. "Virginia, you're in the Amethyst Room, and I've placed Jessica and Wayne in the Library Room." She smiled apologetically at Hermione's relatives. "Remus changed the switches to Muggle switches but you can change them back if you want."

Virginia was relieved to hear it. "I'd prefer mine left the way they are."

Jessica also concurred with Virginia's viewpoint. "We lived in a Muggle neighborhood in Sydney, and because I'm not magical, everything in the house was geared towards me, and so I'd appreciate everything being left as it is."

Leaving the adults talking, Harry and Dudley took the cases upstairs, after which Harry fled to his room where he doubted that even Debbie would disturb him. He was right, and Harry was able to avoid the overpowering girl until it was time to eat.

Remus finally made his appearance at dinner, having been at Hogwarts sorting out the usual letters for all the school years, and exam results for the fifth and seventh years. He greeted Hermione's family on walking in. "You'll have to excuse my absence. I was out on business. I'm Remus Lupin."

Nic shot to his feet, holding out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Professor Lupin. I'm Nic Fuller."

Remus was rather taken aback at Nic's address. "Professor?"

"It turns out that my cousins are magical, Remus," Hermione told him. "We discovered that our family keeps secrets so well that

neither of us was aware of what the others were. Debbie recognized Harry and it pretty much gave the game away."

Remus leaned over and shook hands with Nic. "You can call me Remus."

Nic shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Professor. I'm going to be joining Hogwarts in September."

It was then that Remus connected the letter he had put in a pile to be addressed the next morning. "You must be Dominic Fuller then."

Nic nodded. "But everyone calls me Nic."

"Well, Nic, as much as I appreciate the good manners, and during term time I do expect you to address me as Professor Lupin, while we are here, you can call me Remus," Remus told him, before going onto to shake hands with everyone else. "I didn't notice any more Fullers listed."

"I'm going to Beauxbatons," Debbie informed him as she released Remus' hand.

"You were attending Berowra up until now?" Remus asked, taking his seat.

"Yes, but with Dad's job changing, I decided to move to France with them," Debbie told him. "Australia seemed really far away."

The conversation ebbed and flowed over dinner, touching mainly upon Wayne Fuller's job with Beauxbatons as the new history teacher. But once dinner had ended, Remus pulled out several letters. "I'll hand these out to you now. Nic, I had no idea you would be here, so my apologies." He then handed over the various letters.

Hermione sighed heavily as she took her letter. "I won't be a prefect, will I?"

Remus regretfully shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Your change to Ravenclaw was too late for us to consider you as a prefect."

"I quite understand," Hermione said, although she was horribly disappointed. However she cheered up when she discovered that

she had achieved Outstandings in all the third year exams she had finally completed just before school had ended.

Harry, however, was not going to be disappointed, and his face showed his astonishment as he opened his letter and a small 'P' fell out. "I'm a prefect?"

Remus could feel Harry's surprise and pleasure. "Yes, you are, Harry." He then turned to Justin, from whom he could feel a small amount of disappointment emanating. "I'm sorry, Justin. You were also up for consideration but given your duties as captain of the quidditch team, we decided that Harry would be better suited for the position."

Pleased for Harry, Justin shrugged off his disappointment. "I'm good with it. Who's got the girl's position?"

"Hannah," Remus told him, and he could see that Justin was rather pleased to hear it. "Gryffindor has gone to Dean Thomas and Parvati Patil; Slytherin to Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson; and Ravenclaw to Padma Patil and Terry Boot."

30th August 1995

Hermione found Harry lurking behind a bush in the conservatory. "Harry, what are you doing?"

"Hiding from your cousin," Harry said, his demeanor somewhat shamefaced. "She keeps pestering me to go to lunch with her."

"She's off to Beauxbatons in the morning," Hermione reminded him. "So at least you won't have to put up with her after that, well, not until Christmas anyway."

Harry groaned softly. "Did your aunt have to invite everyone for dinner?"

"It's more likely to be a party, Harry," Hermione warned him. "And she just wants to pay you back for your hospitality."

Although Harry had taken to Jessica, Wayne, and Nic, he thoroughly loathed Debbie. "She could pay me back by keeping that she-mantis away from me."

Hermione burst out laughing. "That's a perfect description of her."

Harry smiled ruefully. "I wish I could say I thought of the name, but it was Luna."

"That's not like her," Hermione said with surprise.

"Debbie was making eyes at Dudley last night, and I don't think Luna was too happy about it," Harry revealed what had happened while Hermione had been eating out with her mother.

"He still hasn't made a move?" Hermione had been hoping that Dudley would return Luna's interest.

"I'm not sure he's interested," Harry had to say truthfully. "And to be honest, Dudley is the last person I ever expected Luna to take an interest in."

"At least she's stop hankering after unachievable goals, such as Remus and Dae," Hermione commented. "I bet you wish Debbie would do the same."

"Wouldn't I just," Harry said rolling his eyes. "I've been 'packing' for three days now just so that I can hide from that she-mantis."

Hermione couldn't help but giggle again at the nickname Luna had bestowed upon her cousin. "I'll have to remember that one." She nodded towards the exit. "Come on. You can put up with her for one day more."

"At least I won't have to see her again until Christmas," Harry said brightly.

He had no idea how wrong he was.

Next Chapter: Hermione has a disturbing dream; Harry's name finds its way into the Goblet of Fire; Hermione asks Harry to the Yule Ball.

Note: Thanks to everyone who sent me good wishes for my surgery
- they were much appreciated.

Chapter 54: The Goblet of Fire

September 19th 1995

Hermione woke up gasping. For a long moment she sat in the dark before getting up and pulling on her dressing gown and heading down to the common room. She had only been sitting in front of the fire for less than ten minutes when Luna came ambling in. "Luna, what are you doing up?"

"I woke up with the feeling that I should come down here," Luna said, slipping in front of the fire next to Hermione. "You look as though you've been crying."

Hermione wiped her face with a tissue from her pocket. "I had a bad dream."

"A dream dream or a memory dream?" Luna asked.

"I think it was a memory dream," Hermione said in a shaky voice.

"You should tell Remus or Aunt Cordie," Luna suggested.

Telling anyone was the last thing on Hermione's mind. "I can't."

"But the dream might be important," Luna protested.

"I don't think so," Hermione said, her cheeks burning fiery red.

Luna could not understand Hermione's reticence. "Why not?"

Hermione looked down at her hands in the dim light of the fire. "It's not a memory I can share."

Now Luna finally caught on. "You mean it was a sex dream?"

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "Yes, and it was about him."

"Was it any good?" Luna asked, always curious about something she could not wait to try.

"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed. "It was horrible."

Luna sighed in disappointment. "I thought being that good looking, Seville would have been brilliant at it."

Hermione shook her head in exasperation. "Luna, of all the people to crush on, you have decided to pick on a memory of a man like that?"

Luna shrugged unashamedly. "But he's sooooo good looking."

"He's the devil!" Hermione snapped, her dream far too fresh in her memory for comfort.

Luna could see that her comments about Thomas Seville were not going down very well. "Was it that bad?"

"Worse," Hermione admitted, biting her lip. "I'd rather have had a nightmare like Remus had."

Luna shuddered at the memory she had witnessed. "I don't think I would."

"You didn't experience my dream," Hermione pointed out.

"Did he hurt you in it?" Luna asked, trying to find out exactly what had happened in the dream.

"No," Hermione said, shivering. "I think it would have been easier to deal with if he had."

Not really getting anywhere, Luna decided to use a blunter approach. "So what happened?"

Hermione refused to tell her. "I'm not discussing it."

"It will make you feel better," Luna said gently, trying to get Hermione to open up.

Luna's probing had the opposite effect to the one she wanted as Hermione angrily got to her feet, more than a little annoyed at her friend's apparent insensitivity. "I'm not giving you a blow by blow description!" She then burst into tears.

Luna reached up and grabbed Hermione's hand, pulling her back down and into a hug. "I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to."

Once again Luna's words had a contradictory effect, and Hermione began to blurt out how she felt about her experience. "I feel so awful, Luna. I feel dirty."

Luna was a little lost by Hermione's comment. "Dirty?"

Hermione began to cry harder and admitted to what had been upsetting her so much. "I liked what he did to me in the dream."

Luna hugged Hermione closer. "It's just a memory belonging to someone else, Hermione."

"Then why did it feel as if it was happening to me?" Hermione asked, her voice sharp with distress.

Luna rocked Hermione as she went back to crying. Only once she had stopped, did Luna press her earlier suggestion. "I still think you should tell Remus you've had the dream, and that you've gone through something similar to him."

"He was tortured," Hermione pointed out an obvious difference.

"But like you, he could feel it happening in the dream as if it had been him," Luna reminded her. "You can just tell him that you don't want to discuss exactly what happened, but I think he should know."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't, Luna. I just can't."

"I'll tell him if you want," Luna offered.

Hermione thought about it for a moment, and after going to and fro in her mind, she decided that from a logical standpoint, Remus and the others had to be informed that she had experienced something similar to Remus. "Okay, but I don't want to be there, and I don't want anyone to know what happened in the dream."

"I'll go see Remus before breakfast," Luna said, aware that Remus usually went to the Great Hall about six. "I'll tell him you dreamt about Seville but that you can't talk about it."

The two girls then fell silent for a while until Luna asked a very pertinent question. "Why do you suppose it happened now?"

Hermione blew her nose before answering. "I was born at 2am, and I woke up at 2.30am. I think my 16th birthday had something to do with it."

"I promise that my birthday present will be much, much nicer," Luna remarked, wanting to make Hermione feel better. "It's in my room. Would you like it now?"

Harry had already warned Hermione that Luna had been threatening to buy Hermione a book on mythical creatures, and Hermione was far from in the mood to discuss things like that. "Maybe later, Luna."

She had no idea that after speaking to Harry, Luna had actually bought Hermione a deluxe planner for homework, something Hermione had been after for a while. "That's okay, I'll give it you later."

"Thanks, Luna." Hermione yawned, suddenly feeling exhausted.

Luna could see how tired her friend was. "You should go back to bed."

Still completely unnerved by the dream she had had and afraid of having another one, Hermione immediately shook her head. "I'm fine."

"I'll go with you," Luna offered.

Normally Hermione would have refused, but she was tired, so she agreed to Luna's offer and headed back upstairs. Once inside her dormitory, she set up a silencing charm, pulled the curtains around the bed, and snuggled up in it. Luna then climbed in beside her, curling up against her back. "Go to sleep. I'll wake you if appear to be having a dream."

Feeling reassured, Hermione quickly fell asleep, as did Luna despite her offer. Both girls were woken by the sound of the alarm Hermione had set for six fifteen. Opening her eyes, Hermione started at the feeling of a warm body curled up to her, only to relax when she

remembered who it was. After switching off her alarm, she turned around to face Luna. "Luna, I think you'll have missed Remus. It's quarter past six."

"I'd better go and get dressed, but I'll try and speak to Remus at lunchtime," Luna promised.

Later that morning

Remus noticed that Hermione was distracted throughout the lesson, and he therefore asked her to remain behind when it ended. "Miss Granger, I'd like a word before you head to lunch."

"Yes, Sir." Hermione resignedly waited until everyone had left before glancing back at Remus, her stomach now tied in knots.

Remus beckoned to her. When she was standing in front of him, Remus asked what was bothering her. "Hermione, you actually got questions wrong. Is everything alright?"

Hermione slapped on a bright smile. "Yes, Sir."

"You know better than to try to lie to me," Remus warned, instantly detecting the falsehood and Hermione's nervousness.

Hermione sagged. "I don't want to talk about it."

Thinking it was something to do with school, Remus walked over and shut the door to the classroom before turning around. "You're upset about something. Are you being picked on?"

Hermione immediately denied it. "No."

Remus was conscious that she was telling the truth this time. "Then what's wrong?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Hermione repeated her earlier comment.

"Hermione, if it's bad enough to affect your work as it has today, then it must be something pretty serious," Remus commented in a very gentle voice. "You weren't this distracted when you broke up with George."

Hermione was completely undone by Remus' concern, and as she had done with Luna that morning, she burst into tears. As the sobbing got more profound, Remus gathered the weeping girl into his arms. "Hermione, it's not like you to get upset over nothing, so please, tell me what's wrong."

"I had a bad dream," Hermione wept into Remus' shoulder. "About him, and I could feel everything."

Remus now understood why she had reacted so badly that morning. "I can only sympathize with you, and say that I'm sorry you had to go through the same thing as I did."

"It wasn't the same," Hermione howled, her words spilling out almost involuntarily. "It was different."

"Did Seville hurt you in any way in the dream?" Remus asked, unknowingly taking the same line of questioning that Luna had that morning.

Hermione shook her head, her face brushing her tears into Remus' shirt as she did so.

"Then what..." Remus broke off as he experienced a wave of shame and disgust that hit him like a tidal wave. He knew then exactly what sort of dream Hermione had experienced. "Oh Merlin! I'm so sorry, Hermione."

Hermione began to cry harder, feeling beyond shamed. "Why me?"

If Remus had not been a werewolf he would not have caught the barely whispered words. "I don't know but I do know you have nothing to feel ashamed about."

"But..." Hermione could say little more as her crying began to get the better of her breathing, and she started to hyperventilate.

Still holding her, Remus unholstered his wand and applied a calming spell, which although mildly effective, would not work as well as a calming potion. He therefore also instructed Hermione to help herself. "Take deep breaths for me, Hermione."

She did as Remus asked, and once she became a little calmer, she was finally able to get some control over her emotions. "I'm... I'm...I'm s...s...sorry, Remus."

"Don't be." Remus immediately batted away her stuttered apology. "Now I think you should spend the rest of the day with Cordie. You're in no state to attend classes."

Hermione began to protest. "But Pro..."

"Professor Snape will be delighted you can't make potions, I'm sure," Remus announced drily, earning a slight smile from Hermione, who finally managed to look at Remus as he went on. "Hermione, I know that you're embarrassed by what you've experienced, but you shouldn't be. We know from Petunia and my dreams that Mione was married to Seville, and sex would naturally have formed part of that experience. You were therefore bound to experience a dream like that at some time."

Hermione went very red as she thought about what else Petunia had said. "Oh God!"

This time Remus had an immediate idea of what Hermione was thinking. "And as much as neither of us like the idea, yes, you're likely to have dreams about Mione and my counterpart as well." Remus refrained from mentioning that he had already experienced one, not wanting to embarrass Hermione any further.

Hermione dropped her face into her hands. "I hate this."

"As do I," Remus assured her. "Come on, let's take you to Cordie."

Once in his rooms, Remus outlined to Cordelia what was wrong, saving Hermione the embarrassment and stress of having to repeat herself. Once Remus had gone, Cordelia set about making lunch. "You can help, Hermione, if you want to."

Glad of something to do, Hermione began to aid Cordelia, silent until the quiet got too much for her. "Everyone's going to think I'm disgusting when they find out."

Cordelia put down the knife she was using to take Hermione's hand. "No-one will think that, Hermione. Remus has said that we will

mention you've had a dream involving Seville but that nothing important happened in it."

Hermione started violently as a knock sounded at the door, and Cordelia decided that Hermione was in no fit state to have visitors. She therefore made a suggestion. "I think you should go into my bedroom and wait."

Proving Cordelia's suspicion about Hermione's state of mind correct, Hermione fled without protest.

Only once Hermione was safely out of the way did Cordelia open the door to find Harry standing outside. "What brings you here?"

"Remus said that Hermione wasn't feeling well, and that she was here," Harry said as he walked in. "I was worried."

Cordelia closed the door. "She's in my room taking it easy, but I think you should leave her be for the moment."

"Has she been to Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked, worry tingeing his voice.

"It's just a bit of a girl's problem," Cordelia said, deliberately refraining from identifying anything specific. "And she therefore doesn't require Madam Pomfrey's attention, just a little TLC and rest."

Harry did as Cordelia expected and jumped to the wrong conclusion. His face burning, he decided that he could do little to help. "Tell her I hope she feels better soon."

"I will," Cordelia promised.

Only once she heard the door close did Hermione come out, a tiny smile on her face at the thought of Harry assuming she was experiencing her monthly cycle. "He was mortified, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Cordelia said, smiling back. "But he was concerned." She headed back into the kitchen. "He likes you, doesn't he?"

Hermione denied it. "He'd be just as concerned if it was Luna."

"I didn't see him queuing to hold her head for her when she was sick after eating too much candy floss at the fair," Cordelia remarked in a sage voice, before softening it again. "I think he really does like you."

Hermione contemplated this for a few moments before tilting her head up to look at Cordelia. "Do you think so?"

"Yes," Cordelia said. "I've never seen 'a friend' be so attentive to someone before."

"He's not that attentive," Hermione protested.

"When we viewed Remus' memories that night we learnt the truth about Harry, Harry spent most of that night either holding your hand or holding you," Cordelia reminded her.

Hermione thought back. "But he was dating Sammie then."

"It didn't stop him from showing his concern for you," Cordelia said, before bringing up a pertinent point. "But while I can tell he likes you, I'm not entirely sure how you feel about him."

Hermione stopped chopping the cucumber she was currently massacring. "I like him. But even if you are right about Harry liking me, he'd never go out with me."

"Because of what he has in him?" Cordelia asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

"Then I think you need to start reminding Harry that he's probably been in closer proximity to you than he ever was with Sammie with all that hugging and hand holding, to say nothing of the time the two of you spend together studying," Cordelia said sensibly. "And I think if you were going to be infected, it would have happened by now."

As she continued to chop up vegetables, Hermione reflected on what Cordelia had said. And that night at the small birthday party that Cordelia had insisted upon holding, Hermione found herself watching Harry more closely than she would have done normally. However, by the end of the night when Harry had shown no more

concern for her than anyone else, Hermione decided that Cordelia was totally wrong about Harry's feelings for her.

October 29th 1995

Harry waited, with everyone else, for the Goblet of Fire to spit out a name. Just like his friends, he had been quite excited to learn that Albus had decided that it would be a good idea to start up the Triwizard Tournament again. It had been announced a few days after their return to school but despite his initial excitement, Harry had been disappointed to discover that because of the tournament, quidditch had been cancelled for the year. He had also been dismayed to discover that Debbie had managed to make it through to the final candidates for Beauxbatons, and he had a horrible feeling that she was going to be the one representing her new school.

Suddenly the Goblet flared up and a piece of cream paper came whirling out. Remus picked it up, and read out loud the name, proving Harry's fears incorrect. "From Beauxbatons, Jacot Vigier."

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of the school as the blonde boy bowed and then left the room. Once more the ancient Goblet, which held the names of those who were over seventeen and who had chosen to vie to represent their school, spat out a name.

And again, Remus read it out loud. "From Durmstrang, Natasha Vladimir."

A tall and very dark-haired girl with the most striking bone structure stood up and bowed, before leaving the Great Hall.

For Hogwarts the next part was the most exciting. This was to be the person who would represent their school. The Goblet flared up, and a name was spat out. Remus smiled. "From Hogwarts, George Weasley."

Gryffindor went wild. Harry politely clapped. Justin nudged him. "He's going to love this. He's done something that the great Harry Potter can't."

"Bully for him," Harry said, grinning, before turning his attention to Albus who gave a brief speech about what was expected from the Champions and when the first task would be held.

At the head table, Severus hid his concern. He had been ordered by Tom to place Harry's name in the Goblet under the name of another school, which he had done. Only for some reason, the ploy had failed.

Harry was leaving the Great Hall at the end of the announcements when Remus motioned to him. "Yes, Sir?"

"I need to speak to you about the Goblet of Fire, Harry," Remus said, leading Harry away from his friends. Once inside the office that had formerly been Binns', Remus sat Harry down, and without further ado got straight to the point. "Albus set up the Goblet so that any underage names would be ejected before the Goblet was fully primed for the last stage. We discovered this just this morning."

Harry's eyes widened to see a scrap of paper bearing his name in Remus' hand. "I didn't put it in."

"I didn't think you had," Remus assured him. "You've said often enough how much you hate the limelight. What worries me is that someone obviously thought differently."

"You think someone is after me?" Harry asked nervously.

"It could just have been a fan of yours who did it," Remus had to admit. "But then again it could have been someone who intended for you to become part of the Tournament for more nefarious reasons. And once your name comes out of the Goblet in the final ceremony, then you would have been magically bound to take part."

Harry swallowed hard. "Do you think Voldemort had something to do with it?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but I thought I should warn you," Remus said.

"Thanks." Harry sighed as he got to his feet. "Just what I need, another nightmare year."

"It might just have been a coincidence, Harry," Remus responded. "I just thought you should know."

Two Days Later

Severus bowed low as he entered the room. "I..."

"Failed," Tom said as he threw a newspaper showing the three Champions at Severus. "Tell me, Severus. Why didn't Potter's name appear as a Champion?"

"I only discovered after the event that Lupin persuaded Dumbledore to place a spell on the Goblet to reject the names of any underage contenders before the Goblet entered the final phase," Severus explained his failure.

"Which means that thanks to your incompetence, we now need another way to remove Potter from the equation," Tom snapped.

Severus braced himself for the Cruciatus but nothing happened, and so he enquired as to Tom's plans. "Do you have anything in mind?"

"Yes," Tom said, having had two days to think about things. "You're going to brew the Trucido Progenius Potion."

Severus was rather confused. "That potion is used to eliminate bloodlines. There must be an easier way to kill Potter."

"Potter is not my only target," Tom informed him, before outlining what he was aiming to do.

"You are aware that the potion takes months to brew?" Severus checked.

"Yes, and I'm also aware that it might take you some time to obtain the necessary blood," Tom acknowledged. He then put the matter aside as he knew that Severus would have to leave soon. "Do you have anything else you wish to tell me before you leave?"

"Yes," Severus nodded, before delivering his most important piece of news.

Tom was rather delighted to hear it. "Then I believe I have an idea as to how to deal with one of my most pressing concerns."

After Tom filled him in on his plan, Severus was not so sure he would do the same. "Are you sure that it is wise?"

"You're questioning my decision?" Tom asked in a silky voice.

"Of course not," Severus immediately said, not wishing to come under the Cruciatus curse.

"Keep it that way," Tom ordered. "You may go but should you fail me again, I will not be so kind."

"I won't fail," Severus said, and after bowing, left to head back to Hogwarts.

November 7th 1995

Since Beauxbatons had arrived for the Tournament, Harry found himself continually trying to avoid Debbie. And it didn't matter how much Harry made it clear he was not interested, she still persisted.

Hermione found him lurking on the quidditch pitch. "Hiding from the she-mantis again?"

Harry nodded somewhat sheepishly. "I've changed my mind about that name. She's more like a bloodhound. She just won't take no for answer."

"Most boys would have given in by now," Hermione said, sitting down on the bleachers next to Harry.

"I know she's only interested because I'm the Boy Who Lived, and not for any other reason," Harry said shortly. "And to be truthful, even if she was interested in 'just Harry', she's not my type."

"Do you still regret ending things with Sammie?" Hermione asked softly, hoping for a negative answer.

Harry had thought it would take him longer to get over finishing with the Ravenclaw, but aware that it had been the right thing to do, he was no longer upset over it. "No. I could hardly explain to her that

I'm a Horcrux and that I'm probably going to die fighting Voldemort. I mean who wants someone like that?"

Debbie chose that moment to happen upon the couple, seemingly from out of nowhere, and she revealed that she had caught the very last part of Harry's penultimate sentence. "You think you're going to die fighting Voldemort?"

"Yes," Harry said bluntly. "I do."

"Is that why you keep turning me down?" Debbie asked out of curiosity.

Harry decided to continue to be frank. "No. It's because I'm simply not interested."

Debbie was rather unused to anyone turning her down, and it smarted that Harry had finally come out and said it to her face. "Is it because I'm Australian?"

"No, it's because you're not my type," Harry retorted.

"Then who is your type?" Debbie asked in a snotty voice. "A little miss know-it-all like Hermione?"

A very indignant Hermione shot to her feet, intending to tear into her cousin, but Harry beat her to the punch. "Actually, yes. I would prefer to go out with someone like Hermione if you must know."

"But she's not even pretty," Debbie protested, more than a little upset that someone would prefer her mousy cousin over her.

"I think she's very pretty," Harry said, defending Hermione.

"Whatever!" Debbie snapped and stalked off.

Hermione turned to face Harry. "I am so, so, sorry about that, Harry."

Harry could see that Debbie's remarks had gotten to his friend. "I'm fine. She's upset you though, hasn't she?"

"A little," Hermione had to admit. "I had no idea that she was so resentful of me."

"I know from talking to Nic that although she's clever, Nic outdoes her in everything," Harry told Hermione. "And according to Nic, Debbie was hoping to make it as Beauxbatons' champion to prove she was better than both you and him."

Hermione was completely shocked. "But I was too young to enter, and Nic had no interest in entering."

Harry was with the older boy on that one. "So he said, and I don't blame him. Remus wouldn't tell me what the first task was, but he said he was relieved that I'm not part of it."

Hermione felt the same way. "Me too. If they follow the history of previous tournaments, then the Champions will be facing some sort of monster but the list is endless as to what it could be."

Harry glanced behind him at the school. "At least we know it won't be a Basilisk."

"But it could still be a snake," Hermione said, thinking about what the Champions could be forced to face.

"If it is, then remind me to keep my mouth shut," Harry said, his face clouding over. "One pet gone bad is enough."

Hermione knew that Harry still felt bad about Nagini biting Hagrid and then vanishing. "She was a wild animal, Harry, and perhaps Hagrid did something to frighten her."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe, but I still think it's odd that Hedwig died on the same day."

"It was probably just coincidence," Hermione said, unable to think of another reason.

"Around me there is no such thing as coincidence," Harry said glumly.

"Why don't you get another pet?" Hermione suggested. "You could get a kneazle like Crookshanks; it would give him a friend to play with."

"Cordie said Crookshanks is a big enough nuisance on his own," Harry reminded Hermione of his guardian's dislike of the big orange cat.

"It's not my fault that Lisa is allergic to cats," Hermione said, bristling somewhat. "Otherwise Crooks would be staying in the dormitory with me."

"Well, I'm certainly not getting a cat," Harry said, getting to his feet, "and definitely not another owl. It was too horrible losing Hedwig like that."

Hermione decided to divert Harry, and she chose the one subject she knew he would not like. "Come on. I have homework to finish, and I'm willing to bet that you do also."

"Slave driver," Harry said, although his voice held no malice.

"If you don't study, you won't do well in your OWLs," Hermione reminded him, choosing to push Harry to do well at every opportunity. "Now let's head for the library."

November 18th 1995

Even though quidditch had been cancelled, Harry still wanted to keep up his seeking skills, and so he had borrowed a snitch and gone out on his own. Now that all their worries about Voldemort, Lestranger, and Sirius were gone, the Ministry had called back the Aurors and the Dementors, and so Harry was free to roam wherever he wanted. Harry therefore landed close to the Forbidden Forest to take a breather. He had barely touched down when he heard a voice saying 'psst'.

Harry swung around to see a bulky figure in the bushes. "Hagrid?"

"I have something yeh might like to see," Hagrid whispered as he beckoned to Harry, who headed into the Forest to join his large friend.

The two chatted amicably as they walked along in the Forbidden Forest until all of a sudden a jet of flame shot out from some bushes, and Harry found himself being forcibly pushed over. When he looked up, Hagrid was standing over him and holding out his hand. "Sorry about that."

"What was that?" Harry asked, brushing himself off.

"Yeh'll find out," Hagrid said mysteriously, and he led the way through the thickets.

Harry's mouth fell open when he spotted three dragons, but his face lit up when he spotted a familiar face. "Charlie!"

Charlie passed his gloves to Tula and came running over. "Harry, Hagrid said he would bring you down if he saw you. What do you think?"

Harry stared in amazement at the three dragons that were being settled in. "Are they here for the tournament?"

"Yes," Charlie said grinning. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Beautiful was not the first word that came to Harry's mind. "Scary, Charlie! They look scary."

"The most dangerous one is the Hungarian Horntail," Charlie informed him, smiling as though it was something cute to be cuddled. "But she's gorgeous and my favorite."

"Isn't that one a Chinese Fireball?" Harry asked, recalling some of what Charlie had taught him when he had stayed with him at the Reserve as a punishment.

"She is," Charlie said, smiling again. "And the last one is a Welsh Green. They're a lot more common than the other two but still pretty ferocious."

"I wouldn't want to be George," Harry said, shivering. "Which one will he be going up against?"

"That won't be decided until tomorrow, just before the contest starts," Charlie informed him. "You will be cheering him on, won't you?"

"Yes," Harry promised. "I don't hold anything against George; it's the other way around."

"You did try to steal his girlfriend," Charlie said, still believing that Harry had kissed Hermione in the library.

"I really didn't," Harry said firmly. "George totally misunderstood what was going on."

Charlie knew that there were two sides to any story, and he therefore stopped haranguing Harry about George. "It really doesn't matter now anyway. George is seeing someone new, that Australian girl from Beauxbatons."

Harry groaned softly, not having heard anything about it. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

"You know her?" Charlie asked, having only read about the girl in George's last letter to him.

"She's Hermione's cousin, " Harry said in resignation. "And she spent the end of the summer and the start of term chasing after me until I told her pointblank that I wasn't interested. You might want to give George a heads up."

"Thanks for the warning, but I doubt George will listen," Charlie responded, having listened to George moan about Harry and Hermione for the entire seven weeks his brother had stayed at the Reserve.

"Personally I think he's mad if he doesn't," Harry said. "But that's his choice."

"So how is school?" Charlie asked, walking Harry away from the enclosures, not wanting him to get burnt if something untoward happened.

"Same old, same old," Harry said offhandedly. "But things are definitely getting harder with OWLs on the horizon."

Charlie smiled at Harry. "I expect Hermione is all geared up for it."

Harry grimaced. "She's used Luna's birthday gift to make homework calendars for all of us, and I'm sometimes afraid to go into the library."

Charlie laughed. "I'm glad I'm done with all that." He then became serious. "Is there anything you need?"

Harry shook his head. "As I told you in my last letter, Remus and Cordie are taking good care of me."

Charlie was still more than a little disappointed that when Minerva's will had been read, the couple had been made Harry's new guardians, but he kept this from Harry, instead asking about Harry's cousin. "How is it going with Dudley?"

Harry was still somewhat stunned at how well his cousin had taken to his new Muggle school and to Hogwarts. "He loves being part of Hufflepuff even though he's not actually attending classes at Hogwarts. I'm not so keen that he snores like a warthog but at least I can put up a silencing spell."

"Hagrid said that Dudley has shown some interest in the animals he keeps," Charlie mentioned it as he too liked most animals, and not just dragons.

"He likes the Hippogriffs," Harry relayed what Dudley had told him. "And he's also rather taken with history, and so Remus is giving him lessons at night so that Dudley can learn about wizarding history." Harry shook his head and smiled. "I never would have thought Dudley would be so interested in something as boring as that."

"I liked history as well," Charlie revealed. "Unfortunately I didn't think so much of the teacher. I suppose Remus makes a difference."

"A massive one." Harry had to admit the classes had become far more interesting since Binns had passed over. "And I might actually get a decent mark in my OWLs because I can stay awake."

"Charlie!" a voice called over.

Charlie waved to say he would be back. "I have to go, Harry."

"You won't leave without saying goodbye, will you?" Harry asked, relishing what little time he had with Charlie.

"Of course not," Charlie promised, and he ruffled Harry's hair. "You're as big as me now, or at least as tall as me. Not quite as brawny though."

"I'll get there." Harry grinned as Charlie started to walk off. Looking up, Harry spotted a clearing in the trees, and mounting his broomstick, he shot off back towards school.

It came as no surprise to anyone who knew him when George easily won the first round of the Triwizard Tournament, using a combination of a noise spell and a mix of a confundus charm and a conjunctivitis spell to distract the dragon he was trying to steal a golden egg from, the Hungarian Horntail. Jacob had finished last, getting his leg burnt, and Natasha had fared little better.

What did surprise Hermione, however, was the announcement after the first task that this year's Yule Ball was to be for fourth years and above, and was specifically for couples. All those unable or not wanting to attend would be treated to a feast in their respective common rooms. Hermione thought it over for several days after the announcement, and given Harry's defense of her against her cousin, Hermione decided to ask Harry to go with her to try and discover if he really did have feelings for her as Cordelia had suspected. Therefore, when he made an appearance in the library late on a Saturday evening, she waited for him to sit down before blurting out, "Harry, do you want to go to the Ball with me?"

"You don't really want to go with me," Harry said, thinking she was only asking because she knew how he felt about getting involved with anyone new. "And I don't want to spoil your chances of going with someone you actually like."

Hermione told Harry the truth. "There is no-one I like enough to want to go with, except for you of course."

Still thinking she meant as a friend, Harry obviously went on. "There must be someone."

Hermione was about to say that there really was no-one else she was interested in, when Dudley came rushing in. "I need to talk to Harry now, in private."

Harry looked at his watch. "I may as well head back to Hufflepuff. I'll see you at breakfast, Hermione." He picked up his books and flashed Hermione a quick smile. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Harry," Hermione said, and she bumped her head lightly onto the table in frustration. "Dudley, I want to kill you."

Completely oblivious to Hermione's potentially homicidal thoughts, Harry followed his cousin down to Hufflepuff. Once inside their dorm room and having asked Ernie to give them a few minutes alone, Harry turned to Dudley. "So what's the problem?"

"It's Luna," Dudley blurted out. "She's asked me to the Yule Ball thingy."

"So?" Justin, who had remained in the dorm room, asked.

"I don't know if I want to go with her," Dudley said. "I mean she's alright but she's not exactly all there, if you know what I mean."

"I don't," Harry retorted.

Dudley went on to his explain his comment. "Well, every time I've tried to show her the internet, she's started going on about weird snorking creatures and asking if I could find them on the internet. I mean she's barking if she thinks that."

Harry scowled. "Luna is not barking. She's a wonderful girl and you should consider yourself lucky she's bothered to even ask you."

In his panic, Dudley had forgotten how protective Harry could be of the women in his life. He therefore decided he should move the conversation on, sharing his next concern. "So if I go would I be expected to do any magic?"

"No," Justin assured him. "It's just a dance really."

"Like a disco?" Dudley asked in hope.

"Not exactly," Harry said. "It's more of an old-fashioned sort of dance."

"You mean like when they have that old fart dancing on TV?" Dudley used to hate it when his mother had wanted to watch that sort of thing.

Harry was hard pushed not to laugh at Dudley's disgusted look. "I'm afraid so, but don't worry, I can teach you."

"I'm not sure I want to dance," Dudley exclaimed in horror.

"Don't you want to dance with Luna?" Justin asked teasingly.

"I dunno." Dudley shrugged and moved on to his final concern. "Do you think she'll expect me to kiss her?"

This time Justin didn't tease. He knew only too well about first kisses, especially given that his own had been with Luna. "Probably. Have you ever kissed a girl before?"

"Course," Dudley spoke as if it was a foregone conclusion, and he went on in a boastful voice. "And I've felt Mandy's tits as well."

Harry had himself gone that far with Samantha, but he would have never ever bragged about it. He therefore gave Dudley two warnings. "Don't you dare ever let Cordie hear you say that, and if you do decide to go with Luna to the Ball and I hear that you've been taking any kind of liberties with her, then you'll be sorry."

Thinking Harry was only joking, Dudley gave a small laugh. Before he knew what had happened, Dudley found himself pressed against the wall with Harry's arm across his throat. Dudley had never felt frightened of his smaller cousin before, but something in Harry's demeanor and the look on his face scared Dudley.

Harry's voice was full of menace as he pushed even more firmly on Dudley's throat. "I mean it, Dudley. Lay one finger on Luna, and I'll kill you."

Justin grabbed Harry's arm. "Harry, he can't breathe!"

Dudley was starting to turn purple, and he was relieved when Harry let go. Rubbing his throat, he could not help but look at Harry as if he had gone mad. "What is your problem?"

Harry's burst of anger vanished as quickly as it had arrived. "I'm sorry, Dud. I don't know what came over me."

"Look," Dudley said, thinking that Harry liked Luna and he had been angry that Dudley had been trying to muscle in on someone Harry fancied. "I'll find someone else to go with if you want to go with Luna. I'll ask Hermione."

Harry tamped down the anger that somehow reappeared almost instantaneously at the thought of Dudley going anywhere near Hermione. And even though he had not accepted Hermione's invitation yet, he decided in that moment he was going to go with her. "She's going with me."

"Then why did you get so het up about Luna?" Dudley asked in confusion.

"I'd get mad if I thought you were trying it on with any girl," Harry clarified. "And not just Luna."

"But you're not mad at Justin, and I know he's been shagging Hannah," Dudley pointed out.

Harry was about to tell Dudley that he had it wrong when he noticed how red Justin had gone. So instead he defended Justin. "Justin is in a serious relationship with Hannah and he loves her. But you don't love Luna, and I bet you didn't love this Mandy, whoever she is, did you?"

"Nah," Dudley admitted, before bringing up a slightly sore subject. "But I bet you didn't love that Samantha bird."

"I didn't but I also didn't have sex with her," Harry protested.

Dudley didn't believe him. "You can't tell me that you went out with her for three months and you didn't shag her."

"I didn't," Harry said vehemently.

"But you must have done something," Dudley said, unwilling to believe that Harry would not have tried it on, especially as it had only been a week after Dudley had been seeing Mandy that she had let him feel her breasts, although that was as far as Dudley had got, with Mandy dumping him a few days later.

"I went as far as you did, but I only did it after asking permission," Harry admitted reluctantly.

"That's just lame, Harry," Dudley remarked in dismay. "You asked?"

"Any decent boy would," Justin said, joining in the conversation again. "And I'm with Harry on this one. If you mess Luna around, then you'll have both of us to deal with."

"This isn't worth it. I'll find someone else to go with," Dudley snapped, and he slammed out of the dorm room.

Harry dropped onto his bed, and groaned. "Luna is going to kill me if he does that."

"You were right to warn him off though," Justin said, and joined Harry on the bed. "But you did come on a bit strong."

"I don't know what happened," Harry said. "Hearing Dudley laughing about treating a girl in that way just hit a nerve I guess."

"Remind me to stay clear of it," Justin teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Harry was worried though. "What if it's the Horcrux that made me so angry?"

The thought had crossed Justin's mind but so had another more logical idea. "It could just have been you getting angry. I wasn't exactly thrilled at Dudley's comments myself."

Feeling more comfortable with this scenario, Harry ran with it. "I suppose."

Justin stood up and tugged Harry off the bed. "Now we've decided that, I think we should go and find Dudley and tell him he can take Luna, but that he can't do anything she doesn't agree to."

"I don't know." Harry was reluctant to let Luna go with Dudley after his admission. "I don't like the idea of him trying it on with Luna."

Justin had a different view on the matter. "He might just have been boasting, Harry. Just because he said he's done those sorts of things, doesn't mean he has."

Harry had known Dudley long enough to know when the boy was lying. "I think he was telling the truth, Justin." He looked over at his friend. "And talking about that sort of thing, how did he know about you and Hannah?"

"We thought everyone was out and didn't bother with a silencing spell," Justin said, his cheeks burning.

"I thought you told Remus you were going to wait," Harry reminded Justin of their conversation. Justin had told Harry about Remus' talk, and he had also passed on the contraceptive spells, even though Harry had assured him that he was unlikely to be sleeping with anyone any time soon, if ever.

"Hannah didn't want to wait," Justin offered up in his defense. "And I'm going to ask her to marry me at the end of the school year after I speak to her dad."

"But you'll still have two years here," Harry pointed out.

"I'm not getting married to her until we finish school," Justin told Harry. "I just like the idea of her wearing my ring, and everyone knowing that I want to marry her."

"Good luck with convincing her father," Harry said, recalling his own stay with the Abbotts. "I bet if Michael Abbott had his way you wouldn't be marrying Hannah ever."

Justin knew this only too well. "If he had his way I think Hannah would still be wearing little dresses and playing in her room where no nasty boys would ever be allowed."

Harry grinned. "So you won't be telling him that you and Hannah have..."

Justin blanched at the thought. "Absolutely not. He'd kill me."

"Then I think you should keep it quiet," Harry said, laughing as he headed towards the door. "Come on, let's go find Dudley."

The Next Morning

Hermione glanced up from the research she was doing. "Harry, I thought you were going into Hogsmeade with Dudley."

"He's mad at me right now for warning him off Luna yesterday," Harry admitted as he slumped down into a chair.

Luna looked up in exasperation. "You knew I liked him, Harry."

Harry tried to defend himself. "I didn't tell him he couldn't go to the Ball with you, just that he couldn't try it on with you."

Luna was rather delighted that Dudley might really be interested in her. "He wanted to have sex with me?"

"If he did, I think he's changed his mind," Harry said. "I lost my temper and almost choked him."

"I think you had better start from the beginning," Hermione suggested, as she was a little lost.

So Harry told the two girls what had happened, but he omitted Dudley's admission about feeling Mandy's breasts, and what Justin had said about Hannah, not wanting to ruin the surprise about their engagement if it happened. "...and when Dudley joked about taking things too far, I lost my temper and threatened him. Long story short, Dudley said it wasn't worth it, and he stormed off."

"I think it was sweet that you wanted to defend me," Luna said, surprising Harry that she was most definitely not angry. "But I still want to go to the Ball with Dudley."

Harry could see that he was not going to change Luna's mind, and so he agreed. "Okay, but if he tries anything on, you have to promise to tell me."

"If he has sex with me and I don't want him to, then I'll tell you," Luna agreed, as she stood up and grabbed her backpack.

"Luna, I meant..." Harry's voice trailed off as Luna went running off. "Perhaps I should have explained that she shouldn't be having sex with Dudley before she tells me that he's tried it on."

"Don't worry, Luna would never do anything she doesn't want to," Hermione said in a sure voice, aware that her friend had simply been excited about Dudley actually liking her.

"Dudley told me exactly how far he had gone with Mandy, and I just don't want him taking things that far with Luna," Harry relayed his concerns.

"And?" Hermione prompted.

"And what?" Harry asked.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed in annoyance. "You can't tell me that Dudley has gone 'that far' with a girl without telling me exactly how far."

Harry went red. "He felt her chest."

Hermione grinned at Harry's discomfiture. "Her chest?"

"You know what I mean," Harry said, unable to say the word 'breasts' to Hermione. "And I really don't want Dudley doing that to Luna!"

"Luna's not stupid, Harry," Hermione said in her friend's defense. "She may come across as a little ditzy sometimes but we've talked about boys and she knows that she can say no."

"And what about if Dudley pressures her?" Harry asked, still really worried about Luna.

"Then I'll hex his head off and bury it where no-one will ever find it!" Hermione said in a threatening voice.

"So you're a little worried as well?" Harry asked, finding himself more than a little amused at his friend's vehemence.

"A bit, but I know that Remus would do more than that if Dudley hurt Luna," Hermione said. "And Dudley might not even try anything on at all, so you could be worrying for nothing."

"He's a boy," Harry quite unnecessarily reminded Hermione. "And all boys think about it."

Hermione smirked at Harry's slip-up. "Including you?"

Harry reddened but answered truthfully. "Yes, but I've never done anything without asking first."

Harry's comment made Hermione realize that Harry must have done more than kissing, and she found this disturbing so she abruptly changed the subject. "So, have you done all of your homework yet?"

"No, but..." Harry started to say.

Hermione tutted, feeling more comfortable now that she was able to slip into her usual role of homework bully. "Go fetch it and we can work together."

"I don't feel like doing homework," Harry said a little grumpily.

"Harry, the sooner you do it, the more time you'll have to relax later," Hermione said forcefully. "So go fetch it and come back here."

Harry rose to his feet, but before he left he turned back to Hermione, his mind still on the subject of the Ball. "When you asked me to the Ball yesterday, did you mean it?"

Hermione had intended to bring the subject up when Harry returned but she was pleased that he had done so before she could. "Of course. Neither of us have anyone else to go with, so I thought we could go together."

"And what about if someone else asks you?" Harry asked.

"George is the school champion, Harry, and even though I'm in Ravenclaw now and nobody is being openly rude to me, I'm still pretty much persona non grata," Hermione reminded him. "So I doubt that anyone else is going to ask me."

Harry had to admit that Hermione had a point. "Then we're on. But if someone else asks, and you like them, then you have to promise me that you'll say yes."

"If anyone I like asks me, then I'll go with them," Hermione promised. "Now go get your homework, and when you've finished it, you can help me with my research."

Harry leaned over to look at what Hermione was doing, only for her to slam the book shut. "I can do homework later."

"Now!" Hermione said, pointing at the door. "I'll still be here when you get back."

Grumbling as he went, Harry left the library to get his unfinished homework. After returning and finishing the homework he had, he shifted closer to Hermione. "So what are you doing?"

"Trying to track down anything I can find on unnamed magical Cartouches," Hermione explained, shoving the pile of books she was looking through at Harry. "If you want to help you can take one."

Harry's curiosity died a quick death at the thought of trawling through so many books but given that he had asked, he reluctantly took one. "I thought Lucy was doing this."

"She's taken on the task of trying to find out something about the Clavis," Hermione said, looking up from the book she had gone back to. "She's at Dae's place using French to help her as she doesn't have much time to root out books."

"She's mad trying to do everything she's taken on," Harry commented, trying to put off looking at the large and dusty tome he had chosen.

"She's doing it because she cares about you and wants to find an answer, Harry," Hermione responded, placing her hand over Harry's. "We all do."

Harry's stomach lurched a little at Hermione's warm touch, and after squeezing her hand, he let it go. "Then I'd better get researching."

Ballywick Lodge

A totally frustrated Lucy threw down the book she was reading, and called out. "French!"

French appeared and bowed low. "How can I be of assistance, Miss Lucy?"

Lucy loved the house-elf with the beautiful manners. "Do you think I could use the kitchen to make myself a sandwich?"

"I can make it, Miss Lucy," French offered. "You are working."

"I need a break from the research," Lucy said, getting to her feet.

"Then talk a walk," French suggested, still not about to let anyone into his pride and joy. "What sandwich would you like?"

Lucy gave up. "Roast beef and horseradish if you have it. And a glass of lemonade."

"I will make it," French said, bowing low and vanishing.

Lucy decided to take up French's suggestion, and she headed out into the gardens, which were a little chilly and damp but the fresh air was extremely pleasant. When she returned she found Dae munching on what looked to be the remnants of a beef sandwich. "That had better not have been my sandwich."

Dae grinned as he swallowed the last mouthful. "It was very good."

Lucy realized it had been her sandwich, particularly as Dae appeared to be washing it down with a glass of homemade lemonade. "French!"

The house-elf did not appear at Lucy's call, and Dae put down the glass of lemonade, and stretched out on the sofa. "He's running a few errands for me. If you want something to eat, I suggest you apparate out and get something. I doubt French will take kindly to you in his kitchen."

Cursing Dae under her breath, Lucy apparated out to a sandwich bar. When she returned, she discovered Dae was sleeping. After

she finished eating, and he had still not moved, Lucy kicked the bottom of his foot. Dae opened one eye, and asked, "Yes?"

"I'd appreciate a little help here." Lucy pointed at the pile of papers strewn around her.

Dae closed his eye again. "You seem to have it under control."

Tired, Lucy lost her temper. "You lazy good for nothing, son of a bitch. I'm slaving my ass off here, working at Hogwarts, doing a night-course, and trying to track down these bloody stupid Pillars. The least you could do is to give me a hand."

Dae knew what he was about to do would only make the redhead angrier, but he did it anyway. Putting his hands together he clapped. "Bravo, you're doing a fine job."

Lucy started to pile her things together. "I don't care how helpful French is, I'm not coming here again."

Dae stood up. "Why did you bother at all? It's obvious you don't like me."

"No, I don't," Lucy admitted. "But I do like French, and his help in tracking down books for me is invaluable, which is something I can't get at Hogwarts or Potter Place."

"Then why are you leaving?" Dae asked.

"As if you care where I do my research," Lucy snapped at him, and she mimicked his own words. "It's obvious you don't like me."

"Not in the slightest," Dae confirmed truthfully, and moved closer to Lucy, taking hold of one of her red tresses. "But I do want you."

Lucy's mouth went dry. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me perfectly well the first time," Dae said, his fingers wrapping Lucy's hair around them, allowing him to tug her closer. When the papers Lucy had been holding fluttered to the floor, he leaned closer, whispering in her ear. "And I think you want me too."

Lucy immediately tugged free. "Don't flatter yourself."

"I'm not," Dae said, this time sliding his arm around Lucy's waist. "And I'm going to prove it."

"How?" Lucy asked, annoyed when her voice came out all breathless.

"Like this," Dae said, yanking Lucy hard against him, and roughly kissing her.

Lucy gasped for air when he released her. "Your animal tactics may work on most women, but not on me."

"I don't see you moving away," Dae pointed out, and he lowered his head, gently running his lips over the pulse he could see pounding in Lucy's neck. And when his lips trailed back to Lucy's mouth and he kissed her again, Lucy kissed him back.

It was almost as if Lucy's acquiescence was a signal to them both, and the gentleness quickly vanished as the kisses became fevered. Lucy hated the man she was kissing, but she had also never wanted anyone more. And as Dae's hand slid up her leg, seeking out her wet warmth, her own fingers were fumbling at his belt.

Their frantic efforts caused them both to tumble onto the sofa, Dae lifting Lucy up so that she was now astride him. Grabbing her hair, he pulled her head towards his so that he could kiss her again, jerking upwards as her hand wrapped around him. Lucy's gasp, as Dae reached up under her skirt and pushed her panties aside, was lost in his mouth, as was Lucy's shocked squeak when Dae pushed her hand away from him, and pulled her down so that he was fully enveloped inside of the warmth he had been seeking earlier.

Lucy broke off the kiss at the sudden intrusion. "Bastard!"

"Do you want me to stop?" Dae offered, his hands on Lucy's hips as he slowly moved her over him.

Hating herself, Lucy shook her head. "No, and I hate you."

"The feeling is entirely mutual, Red," Dae came back. "Now shut up and kiss me."

"Screw you," Lucy refused rather crudely.

"Exactly!" Dae said. Grinning and reaching for hair once again, he pulled her head down to him, fiercely kissing her.

As she responded to Dae's kiss and they began to move more quickly, Lucy could feel her orgasm getting closer, and trying to bite back the moans she so desperately wanted to make, she reflexively gripped Dae's shoulders.

Dae could feel Lucy tightening around him, and he couldn't resist breaking off the kiss to bait her. "You can scream if you want to."

"I'd rather die," Lucy ground out, but she was unable to stop the low moan that escaped as her body began to tremble.

Dae had no intention of holding back, and as Lucy shook above him, the sensations of her tiny shivers caused the same reaction in him, and giving a loud groan, he held Lucy tightly against him as he came.

For a few moments neither of them moved or said anything. Then Lucy got up and tugged down her skirt. Her face red, she hissed at Dae, "Don't ever come near me again!" Then after grabbing her jacket and books, she vanished.

Dae lay on the sofa for a few minutes more before dipping down and picking up Lucy's university pass. "You'll be back."

Next Chapter: Hermione has a surprise at the Yule Ball; Remus meets the head of the French Auror Division; Luna confronts Harry about his feelings.

Chapter 55: Friends with Benefits

Harry finished helping Dudley tie his bow tie. "Do you have the corsage for Luna?"

Dudley scowled. "It's really stupid."

Justin picked up the box that Dudley was ignoring. "It's traditional, Dudley. The Muggle world might be into discos and all that, but here it's more about old-fashioned values."

"And it's stupid," Dudley repeated.

Harry grinned at him. "And yet you're still doing it."

"You said that Luna would be upset if I didn't," Dudley reminded him, grabbing the box that contained the gardenia he had purchased in Hogsmeade a few days earlier, and Harry had preserved for him.

"And she would be," Justin told him. "Now let's shake a tail and get moving otherwise we're going to be late."

The three boys joined Hannah and Susan in the common room, before meeting Ron and Luna outside the Great Hall. Hermione was running late, and so Harry told the others to go on while he waited for her.

When she appeared, Harry's mouth went dry. Even though they were just going as friends, it was clear that she had still made a huge effort. Her hair had been teased in pretty curls that framed her lightly made up face, and the brown silk dress she was wearing hugged her body in all the right places. And as she reached his side, Harry wanted nothing more than to take Hermione into his arms and kiss her, but almost too afraid to touch her, he instead offered her the single white rose he had chosen for her. "Um, the others have gone in, we'd better go in as well."

Hermione hid her disappointment at Harry's failure to compliment her on her outfit. "Okay."

Once inside, after seating Hermione, Harry's attention was drawn back to the entrance of the ballroom when Debbie came in on George's arm. "I was hoping that George had gotten a clue by now."

"He's welcome to her," Hermione said in a tight voice, aware that Debbie had probably gone after George to spite her.

Harry found himself feeling rather jealous that Hermione might still have feelings for George. "Are you okay with it?"

Hermione promised Harry she was. "I'm totally fine, Harry. I'm more concerned about you being upset that Sammie is here with Dean Thomas."

"I'm also fine," Harry assured her, not having even noticed that his former girlfriend had come with Dean. "And I'm pleased that she's found someone else to date."

"Then we're both fine," Hermione said resolutely, although she did not look it.

As the dance for the Champions ended, Harry turned back to face Hermione, and it was only when he overheard Luna mention how pretty Natasha Vladimir looked that Harry was hit with the realization that he had failed to tell Hermione how beautiful she looked. Deciding that he should do so, Harry's nerves made him botch it, his compliment actually sounding more than a little begrudging. "I've just realized that I didn't tell you how nice you looked tonight. The dress is, um, pretty."

Rather disillusioned by Harry's lukewarm offering, Hermione brushed it off. "It's nothing special."

"It suits you," Harry said in an offhand fashion before turning to Justin to talk about quidditch, unaware that Hermione had perceived his nerves as a lack of attention and that she was rather upset by it.

Harry's failure to pay the kind of attention Hermione was seeking continued until George came over to the table where they were sitting. Half expecting George to speak to Ron, Hermione was rather taken aback when he instead bowed slightly to her and held out his hand. "Can I have this dance?"

Seeing as they had barely spoken a word that was not acrimonious since their split, Hermione wondered what was behind the invitation,

but she nevertheless placed her hand in George's and rose to her feet.

Once on the dance floor, George opened up the dialogue with a surprise announcement. "I owe you an apology, Hermione."

This was the last thing Hermione had expected to hear. "Oh!"

"I was unfair and cruel to you that day in the Astronomy Tower," George explained the reason behind his apology. "And for that I want to say I'm sorry."

Hermione was finding it hard to believe what she was hearing. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because going out with Debbie has made me see things differently," George said, glancing over at his girlfriend, before returning his attention to Hermione. "She's helped me to understand that you can't force what you want on another person, no matter how much you want something to be true."

Hermione wondered what Debbie was up to but she kept those thoughts to herself. "George, thank you, and I accept your apology. But I want you to know that even though I'm aware that we would never have worked out, I never wanted it to end as it did."

George felt the same way. "Neither did I, but I think that what happened with you and Harry was probably for the best in the end."

Hermione decided to give telling the truth one last try. "We honestly didn't kiss that day."

Even though he was now more open to listening, George still questioned Hermione's veracity. "Really?"

"Yes," Hermione said softly. "But I know I only have myself to blame that you didn't believe what I was saying. If I hadn't kissed Harry that day when I was learning to apparate, you would never have received the letter, and you would probably have believed me."

"I think I would have," George admitted after a few moments. "So you're going out with him now?"

"No. We came as friends," Hermione said, wishing that she could have answered affirmatively.

"Then why he is watching us like a hawk?" George asked.

Hermione glanced behind her to find that Harry was watching their every move. After his decidedly unenthusiastic attitude that evening, she went with the only reason she could think of for his scrutiny. "I think he's a little concerned that you'll upset me again. He's the one who ended up being drowned in tears when we broke up."

"And are you the reason he broke up with Samantha Brown?" George asked what everyone had wanted to know.

"No." Hermione stuck to Harry's story. "He just felt that their relationship had no future, and so he broke it off. That why he's here with me tonight. He had no-one else he wanted to ask, and given that I'm still something of a pariah, no-one else was going to ask me."

George had the good grace to blush. "I'm sorry about that. I'll call the dogs off if you want me to."

"I'd appreciate it," Hermione said, aware of how much clout George's word had now that he was the Hogwarts Champion.

At that moment the music ended and George led Hermione back to Harry. "Thank you for the dance." He then nodded politely at Harry and walked away.

As soon as Hermione sat down, Luna pounced on her. "What did he want?"

"To apologize for how he treated me when we broke up," Hermione said, still a little dumbfounded that it had really happened. "And, as he put it, he's going to call the dogs off. So I think that things are going to be better from now on."

As dense as he sometimes was, even Dudley was conscious of how much being accepted meant to Hermione. "I'm really pleased for you, Hermione."

Luna's head swung around to look at Dudley, her surprise at Dudley's unprecedented perception obvious, and with Luna's attention now on him, Dudley decided to make the most of the moment. "Um, Luna, would you like to get some air?"

Despite her irritation with Harry, Hermione had to smother her laughter at Harry's expression, waiting until Dudley had taken Luna outside before saying, "If looks could kill, Dudley would be dead right now."

"I just don't want him to try it on with her," Harry said, glaring at the doorway through which the couple had just left.

"I think Luna can handle herself; she's magical and he's not," Hermione reminded him.

"But she can't protect her feelings," Harry said in return.

"Don't forget that I'll hex him into next year if he does anything to hurt her," Hermione said in a pleasant voice that belied her forceful words as she reminded Harry of what she had said previously.

Harry smiled at his friend. "Instead of attacking him, I should have just set you on him."

"That will only be necessary if Dudley misbehaves," Hermione said, and she decided to give Harry one last shot at being a decent date. "Now we've dealt with Luna, how about having a dance with me?"

"I'm not really in the mood," Harry said, Dudley's move with Luna being a forcible reminder of exactly what Harry wished he could be doing with Hermione.

Unable to miss the disappointed look on Hermione's face, Susan nudged her boyfriend, and Ron stood up. "I'll dance with you, Hermione."

Hermione rose to her feet and took Ron up on his offer. "Thank you."

Susan turned on Harry the moment the couple was out of earshot. "Harry, it's almost the end of the night and you've only had one dance with Hermione."

"We're only here as friends," Harry said in justification of his failure to interact with Hermione more.

"And Ron is nowhere near as good a friend, and he's danced with her twice," Susan pointed out. "And Justin and Dudley have danced with her three times, and you're the one who's supposed to be her date!"

It was this comment that drove it home to Harry that his trying to avoid being so close to Hermione might be perceived as being boorish. "I'll dance with her when she comes back."

Harry was as good as his word but even as they danced, he could tell that Hermione was distracted. "What's up?"

Hermione had not been able to hear Susan but she had been able to see her face. "You didn't really want to dance with me, did you?"

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized, and told a half-lie. "I didn't mean to be so rude and ignore you but I was worried about Luna."

Hermione decided it would just cause waves if she pointed out that Dudley had only just taken Luna outside, and that Harry had been ignoring Hermione for most of the night. "She'll be fine, Harry."

"I suppose," Harry said as he returned Hermione to the table. Then, after watching her dance with Justin and then Ron again, Harry realized that he should really dance the final dance with Hermione, and so he reluctantly stood up, holding out his hand. "Would you like to dance?"

Half of Hermione wanted to tell Harry to go to hell, and half of her wanted to be held by him. Her more needy side won out, and so she took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor. Once there, she moved closer to him.

Harry's nerves went into overdrive when Hermione laid her head on his shoulder. He was now made aware of how warm Hermione was, of where her dress was showing the skin of her creamy shoulders, and of how good her hair smelt as it was just under his nose.

Quite a few of the couples around him were taking advantage of this being the final dance and were not only holding their partners close but were also indulging in a goodnight kiss. However Harry was far too afraid of what might happen if he gave into his feelings and kissed Hermione. So instead he continued to hold her against his body, ignoring the little voice that demanded he do more. And when the dance had ended, he simply took her back to the staircase where he had met her, and wished her goodnight.

Ravenclaw

Hermione dejectedly headed for bed, almost jumping out of her skin when she pulled back her bed curtains to find a miserable looking Luna sitting in her bed. Tugging the curtains closed and putting up a silencing spell, she hurried to her friend's side. "Is everything all right?"

Luna shook her head, her face a picture of dismay. "No. Dudley asked me if he could kiss me and I said yes, and..."

"And?" Hermione prompted Luna when she fell silent.

"It was horrible," Luna blurted out. "He was all tongue, and the kiss was wet and horrid. I really like Dudley but kissing him makes me want to throw up."

"Perhaps he's not the right person for you then," Hermione said, scooting into her bed next to Luna as it was cold standing around in just her nightgown. "George certainly wasn't right for me."

Luna found herself wondering if someone else had been. "So did Harry kiss you tonight?"

Hermione shook her head. "No." She sighed. "I really like him, Luna, and after all the effort I made with my dress and make-up tonight, the least I hoped for was a nice kiss at the end of the night."

"So had I," Luna said in a gloomy voice.

Hermione gave Luna's arm a gentle squeeze. "I'm really sorry it didn't work out for you tonight."

"Me too," Luna responded, still sounding a little down. "I don't think I'm ever going to find the Hufflepuff I'm supposed to marry. I was hoping it might be Dudley."

"I didn't have quite such high hopes about this evening," Hermione said, seeking a husband being the last thing on her mind. "I just wanted Harry to notice me."

"Well, I thought you looked beautiful," Luna assured her friend.

Hermione gave Luna a wry smile. "I'm beginning to think I should have gone with you tonight. At least I would have received a worthwhile compliment."

Luna gave Hermione a mischievous grin in return. "And my goodnight kiss would probably have been better."

Both girls burst into peals of laughter, and Luna slid down the bed. "Can I stay here with you tonight? It's cold and I don't want to go back to my own bed."

Hermione knew the girl had already made her mind up that that was where she was sleeping, and so she agreed to her request. "I suppose so, seeing as we're going home tomorrow."

"Do Muggles have anywhere that Dudley could get kissing lessons?" Luna asked seriously, as she lay back on her pillow.

Hermione could not help but smile. "I'm afraid not. It's just something he'll have to get better at by practicing."

Luna shuddered. "I'm not sure that I want to be the one he practices on."

Hermione hazarded a guess. "You're not going to pursue Dudley again, are you?"

"I don't think so," Luna had to answer after a moment's reflection. "I think I'd just rather be his friend."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out for you," Hermione said, leaning over and giving her friend a gentle hug.

Luna returned the hug. "Even though he was a bit of an idiot tonight, at least there's still a chance for you and Harry."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so. He barely spared me a glance tonight, and he only really danced with me after Susan told him off. And even though he danced the last dance with me, he almost couldn't wait to get rid of me at the end of the evening."

Luna disagreed. "When you were dancing with George he looked ready to hex him."

"He was just acting like a concerned friend," Hermione argued, unable to believe that Harry had any interest in her other than as a friend. "Nothing else."

"So you're just going to give up?" Luna asked.

"What else can I do?" Hermione responded. "Short of resorting to cavewoman tactics and clubbing him over the head before dragging him into my arms, there's little I can do."

Luna thought about it for a moment, and came up blank. "I'll think on the problem." Then she gave a yawn. "Gosh, I'm tired."

"I'm tired as well," Hermione said. "So I think it might be better if we got some sleep and forgot about our disastrous dates." After Luna wished her goodnight, Hermione lay back on her pillow and thought about the evening. Sighing, she decided that Harry was a lost cause, and so she closed her eyes, soon falling asleep.

Christmas Morning

Harry was sitting by the fire when Luna joined him. "Couldn't sleep?"

"I'm too excited," Luna said with a gleeful note in her voice.

"I half expected Dudley to be up by now," Harry said in response as he thought back over previous Christmases. "He used to have his presents open before it was even daylight."

"That's the fun of Christmas," Luna said, and then she remembered what Harry had told her before. "Sorry, I didn't think about what

those Christmases must have been like for you without any presents."

"It doesn't matter," Harry said, smiling. "Things are different now."

"You've got lots of presents, and there's a really big one that Justin and Hannah have left you," Luna told him, Justin and Hannah spending Christmas with her family. "And I also saw a big one from you with my name on it. Can I open it now?"

"Nope." Harry refused to let her open the gift, which contained a lifetime subscription to 'Magical and Mythical Creatures', as well as lots of girly things that Cordelia had said that Luna needed. "You'll have to wait until everyone else gets up."

Luna pulled a face. "But Hermione said her mum doesn't usually get up until at least nine on Christmas Day."

"It doesn't matter," Harry said firmly. "You're still going to have to wait."

"Then you can at least tell me what you bought Hermione," Luna demanded, having no idea of what Harry had bought anyone, Harry keeping his gift choices close to his chest, with only Cordelia being consulted for help.

"Some books, quills, and things like that," Harry said, having played it safe with Hermione's gifts.

Luna scowled. "That's not very romantic."

"Romantic?" Harry questioned the use of the word, his voice full of confusion, as although he liked Hermione, he had no idea she felt the same way about him. "Why would I buy her anything romantic?"

"Because I know you like her, Harry," Luna told him, trying to find out whether she was right that Harry's feelings for Hermione still existed. "You're always holding her hand and hugging her."

"Luna, we're just friends," Harry said, denying it could be anything else.

Realizing she was likely going to get nowhere pussyfooting around the issue, Luna decided to reveal Hermione's secret, something she would never normally do. "Then you probably don't want to know that Hermione really likes you."

Harry blinked several times in shock. "What?"

"She likes you, Harry," Luna repeated. "That's why she went shopping with me and Aunt Cordie for a new dress to wear to the Yule Ball, and she let Aunt Cordie put fairy flowers in her hair, make her up, and put perfume on her. And it was all because you were taking her to the Ball."

Harry continued to be astounded. "She did that for me?"

Luna nodded. "Yes, but you blew it by being really horrible to her."

"I wasn't being horrible," Harry refuted Luna's statement. "I just didn't want to get too close."

"Because you're a Horcrux?" Luna guessed.

Harry nodded. "Yes, and even though I want to go out with Hermione, I can't. It wouldn't be fair."

"Don't you think I should be the one to decide if it's fair or not?" Hermione asked, making both Harry and Luna swing around.

"How much did you hear?" Harry asked, feeling rather embarrassed that he had been overheard.

"Enough," Hermione said as she walked into the room. "Luna, will you excuse us?"

Although she wanted to stay, the thought that maybe she had finally tipped the scales towards the two getting together was enough for Luna, and she left without protest.

With Luna out of the room, Hermione reached down and touched Harry's scar. "See, nothing happens when I touch your scar."

"But it might, you saw what happened when Dae cast that spell," Harry said, removing Hermione's hand and getting to his feet.

Hermione blew Harry's argument straight out of the water. "Harry, Dae let me go to you once the soul fragment receded back inside. He said you were safe then and I could touch you. And I'm quite sure that if Dae thought you were dangerous he would have told us, and he hasn't, Harry."

Wanting nothing more than to go out with Hermione, Harry was torn. "I don't know. I'm still afraid of what might happen if I get too close."

"We're really close now," Hermione pointed out.

Harry was well aware of that, as he was standing less than a foot from Hermione. "Hermione, I..." Harry's voice trailed off as she stepped closer to him.

"You don't have to worry, Harry," Hermione said as she took his hand and moved even closer, her voice shaking with nerves. "Nothing awful is going to happen."

Harry's heart began to beat faster as Hermione took yet another step closer to him, and he soon found himself staring into her chocolate brown eyes. "Are you sure?"

Hermione's stomach flip-flopped as she took Harry's other hand and pulled him even closer, so that only one step now separated the two of them. "Totally."

At Hermione's confirmation, even though his head told him not to do it, that it wasn't safe, Harry's heart decided otherwise, and so he closed the distance between them, his own stomach lurching as Hermione closed her eyes and tilted her head.

A small shock went through Hermione when Harry's lips finally touched hers and she gave a tiny murmur. At the sound, Harry closed his own eyes, and when Hermione opened her mouth under his, Harry made the most of the silent offer, and he let his tongue slide in to join Hermione's, dragging another tiny murmur out of Hermione as she reciprocated.

Lost in the kiss, Hermione was not aware of whether seconds, minutes, or years had passed while Harry kissed her. And Harry was

aware of little except for the fact that this was the most wonderful kiss he had ever had.

When they broke apart, both of them were a little breathless, and when Harry tried to step backwards, Hermione tightened her grip on his hands not wanting him to re-establish the distance between them. "Harry, I know that you're worried about the Horcrux problem, but I think we should give this a chance."

Now that the kiss had ended and he could think more clearly again, Harry's head took back over, and he began to make excuses. "Hermione, I don't want to go through the same as I did with Sammie. It was so hard for me to end things with her, especially after she told me she loved me."

For the first time since overhearing Harry and Luna's conversation, Hermione experienced a moment of doubt. "Would you rather be going out with her?"

Harry had cared for Samantha but he knew deep down that he had only gone out with her because he believed that Hermione would never be interested. "No. I liked you first, and because I thought you'd never leave George or ever be interested in me, I decided to go out with Sammie."

"But you genuinely liked her, didn't you?" Hermione knew Harry well enough to know that his feelings for the girl had been far from a sham.

Harry was completely truthful. "I did, very much."

Hermione suffered another pang of worry at Harry's response. "And if you were to get rid of the soul fragment tomorrow and could go back out with her, would you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'd much rather go out with you." Hermione experienced a tiny thrill at Harry's admission, but before she could say anything, Harry spoke again. "Then again it probably doesn't matter what I'd prefer. With this thing inside of me, I'm probably going to end up dead anyway."

Hermione was rather disturbed by Harry's bleak outlook. "Harry, don't say that. We're doing everything we can to find an answer to your problem."

Harry acknowledged this, and used it as an excuse to maintain his distance from Hermione. "I know that, and as much I would like to go out with you, I would rather wait to get together until we can find the answer."

Hermione knew that if she agreed to Harry's suggestion she could be waiting a long time, and after the kiss they had just shared she was not willing to do so. So she instead proposed an alternative that she hoped Harry would go for. "In that case let's not say we're going out together. If we happen to kiss or hold hands, then that would be nice. But if you're worried about being a Horcrux and want to keep your distance, then that's also okay."

Harry's heart took over once more, and it urged him to accept Hermione's proposal. But as much as Harry wanted to say yes, he still did not want Hermione doing something that she might not truly be comfortable with. "And you'd really be fine with it?"

"It goes both ways," Hermione informed him, remembering how it had been with George, and also sensing that Harry was wavering. "There might be times when I want a little space, and I'd like the same consideration."

Happier with the situation now that he could step back if he felt he might be a danger, Harry gave up fighting with himself and accepted the compromise. "Agreed." Then, to be on the safe side, he added a condition. "But you have to promise me that if something appears to be wrong you will seek out help and not try to deal with it on your own."

The memory of the appearance of the soul fragment still very prominent in her mind, Hermione immediately agreed. "I promise."

Feeling more than comfortable at that moment, Harry took advantage of the fact and after tugging Hermione into his arms, he kissed his sort of girlfriend again. And despite his protests that he didn't want to get too close to Hermione, at that moment Harry wanted nothing more than to wrestle Hermione to the ground and spend all day simply kissing her while he held her close. After

breathlessly ending the kiss, Harry decided it was time to calm things down. "I have something I need to tell you."

Hoping her voice would work, Hermione asked, "What is it?"

"I didn't buy you anything romantic for Christmas," Harry answered, grinning. "And Luna said I should have."

Having half feared that Harry was about to tell her that he had changed his mind, Hermione was thoroughly relieved by his answer. "Good, because I didn't get you anything romantic either."

"Can I come back in now?" Luna's voice floated in before Harry could respond. "Because the others are getting up."

"You can come in," Harry called out.

Luna skipped back into the room. "So, are you going out?"

"No," Hermione said.

Harry watched Luna's happy visage vanish, and he let her in on what he and Hermione had decided. "But we've agreed to sort of see how things go, Luna. We're not exactly going out, but we're not exactly not either."

Luna brightened almost immediately. "So you're friends with benefits?"

"Not quite," Hermione responded. "Friends with benefits usually do more than kiss and hold hands."

Luna had not quite comprehended the Muggle saying up until then. "You mean they have sex as well?"

"Yes," Harry told her.

But before Harry could go on to state that he and Hermione were a long way from reaching that position, Remus chose that inopportune moment to walk in. "Did I hear that correctly?"

"We were just explaining to Luna about what friends with benefits means," Harry told him hurriedly. "Not that we were going to have sex or anything."

Despite Harry's assurance, Remus could hardly miss the increased pheromones in the air. "I'm glad to hear it. Merry Christmas, by the way."

Harry let out a sigh of relief that he wasn't about to be taken to task. "Merry Christmas, Remus."

After exchanging a similar greeting, Hermione and Luna both excused themselves to get dressed. Harry was about to do the same when Remus stopped him. "Yes?"

"Today is not the right day to have a chat about you and Hermione, but I just wanted to let you know that we are going to have one," Remus warned Harry.

Harry had a feeling he knew what 'a chat' meant, and he made a move to prevent it. "I've already spoken to Justin about those sorts of things. He told me what you had said to him about relationships and how he shouldn't take steps without thinking about the consequences." Harry then went red. "And he also passed on the spells you told him he should use if he did take things further."

Remus found he was rather relieved to hear this. "Then you get the brief version. Don't rush into anything, and if you ever need anyone to talk to, then come to me."

"I doubt I'll be rushing into anything," Harry told Remus. "I'm still a Horcrux and might be dangerous."

"And yet you've decided to go out with Hermione," Remus noted.

As with Luna, Harry clarified the position. "We're not exactly going out. We're going to take it slowly and see how things go."

If the heightened pheromones in the air were anything to go by, Remus had a funny feeling that things might not go as slowly as Harry expected. "Even so, as I just said, if there is anything you want to talk about, or if you're worried that something is wrong, I want you to come to me."

"I will," Harry promised.

"In that case you've avoided the dreaded talk," Remus smiled at Harry as he said it. "Now go get dressed."

The Next Evening

Paris, France

Harry glanced across the room at a girl who looked vaguely familiar. "Hermione, do you know who she is?"

Hermione followed Harry's gaze to where a dowdy looking girl in spectacles was hopping from one foot to the other, Debbie's friends who had come over from Sydney, watching her and giggling. "She's Georgiana Simon, one of the girls from Beauxbatons."

"I thought I recognized her," Harry said, before glancing back at Debbie's friends, who had now been joined by Debbie. "She doesn't exactly look comfortable."

Hermione frowned as a ripple of laughter carried across the room. "That's probably because she knows that Debbie and her friends are making fun of her. Let's go."

Harry followed Hermione across the room to where Hermione greeted the girl, who she knew because she had been staying in Ravenclaw. "Bonjour, Georgiana."

Georgiana was obviously relieved to see a friendly face. "Bonjour, Hermione."

Hermione then switched to English. "Georgiana, this is Harry Potter. Harry, I'd like to introduce you to Georgiana Simon. She was one of the possible contestants for the Tournament."

This surprised Harry beyond belief. To look at her, he had thought she was simply one of the supporters. But being a polite boy, he offered his commiserations. "I'm sorry you didn't get in."

"T..T..Thank you," Georgiana stuttered, not meeting Harry's eyes.

Harry could not quite hear what Debbie said at that moment but judging from the hurt look that crossed Georgiana's face, Harry had the feeling that Georgiana had heard and that whatever it was, it was probably unkind. He immediately took pity on the frumpy, bespectacled girl. "Would you like to dance?"

Georgiana glanced at Hermione, who smiled encouragingly, and wanting to escape from standing so close to Debbie, Georgiana agreed. "P..p..please."

Harry led the girl as far away from Debbie as he could get. "Are you a friend of Debbie's?"

Georgiana swallowed several times to try and overcome her nerves that she was actually dancing with the Harry Potter. "N..n..not so much."

"Then why did you come here?" Harry asked bluntly.

"She invites me and I am thinking she likes me," Georgiana said in slightly incorrect English, managing to overcome her nervous stutter. "But I am wrong."

Harry's loathing of Debbie grew, and he wondered why the girl had invited Georgiana at all. "Are you here alone?"

"I am with Papa," Georgiana glanced down the room and pointed. "He is there."

Harry noticed a man with his back to the room talking to Wayne Fuller. "She invited your parents as well?"

"Oui," Georgiana said, unthinkingly using French, before blushing and reverting to English. "But Maman does not like parties very much and my little sister, Juliet, was only being born two months ago."

Harry was with the girl's mother on the subject of parties. "And are you enjoying yourself?"

Georgiana shook her head. "Non."

"Then perhaps you would prefer it if I took you over to your father," Harry suggested as the dance ended. "Tell him you wish to go."

"Merci," Georgiana said, deciding that Harry's suggestion was rather a good idea.

Harry politely held out his arm and led the girl in the direction of the man she had pointed out as her father. When he reached the fair-haired man, who was now talking with another guest, Harry waited politely for him to finish his conversation before addressing him. "Good evening, Sir."

Destin Simon held out his hand. "Good evening, Monsieur Potter. I am a little surprised to see you are escorting my daughter. I was not aware that you knew each other that well."

Harry explained. "My friend, Hermione Granger, introduced her to me, and Georgiana said she was here with you."

Destin could see that his daughter was obviously feeling very uncomfortable. "Thank you for returning her." He then made up for his omission. "I apologize. I should have introduced myself. I am Destin Simon."

Harry frowned, recognizing the name, but unable to recall who the man was, he simply acknowledged Destin's introduction. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Sir."

"Are you enjoying yourself, Monsieur Potter?" Destin asked, echoing Harry's own question to Georgiana.

"Not really, Sir," Harry admitted. "I don't like parties very much."

"Why not?" Destin enquired. "Most young people your age do."

"I don't like being stared at," Harry said, aware of Debbie's friends standing not twenty feet away from him, and again they were obviously talking about him or Georgiana, or both. "As far as I'm concerned I'm just a normal boy, just like everyone else."

"Amelia told me that you felt that way, but up until now I was not quite sure whether to believe her," Destin revealed.

It was then that Harry realized who Destin was, and he exclaimed, "You're the head of French Auror Division!"

"I am," Destin confirmed. "And as such, Amelia has told me a great deal about you, Monsieur Potter."

Harry wanted to squirm under Destin's knowing glance. "I'm afraid I can't say the same about you, Sir." Expecting a response, Harry was surprised when, all at once Destin stiffened, and his head snapped around. Wondering what was up, Harry also turned around, but the only new arrivals that Harry could see were Cordelia, Remus, and Dudley. They had been late arriving as they had dropped off to see Dudley's Aunt Marge, who, although she did not have guardianship over Dudley, still had a right to see him. Harry waved to them and they headed for him.

When the trio reached them, Harry introduced them to Destin Simon. "These are my guardians, Remus and Cordelia Lupin, and my cousin, Dudley Dursley."

"Destin Simon," Destin identified himself, shaking hands with Remus first. "And this is my daughter, Georgiana."

Remus kept his handshake brief. "I'm pleased to meet you both, but if you will excuse us, we need to talk to Harry." Not giving anyone else a chance to shake hands, Remus hustled his wife and charges away from Destin and his daughter.

Cordelia waited until she was out of Destin's earshot. "That was really rude, Remus!"

"Keep walking," Remus instructed, leading them outside. Once he was far enough away, he erected a privacy bubble. "I know I was rude, Cordie. But Destin Simon is a werewolf, and I'm not entirely sure what his intentions were towards Harry."

"You couldn't read him?" Cordelia asked.

"I could feel he was very interested," Remus revealed, "which was enough for me to want Harry away from him."

"But he's head of French Auror Division," Harry informed him.

"I know who he is," Remus said. "But that still doesn't mean he can be trusted, particularly as I have no idea what he wanted."

"Well, he must want something since he's coming this way," Cordelia noted, before Harry could say that he had approached Destin and not the other way around.

Remus dropped the privacy bubble and turned to face his fellow werewolf. "Monsieur Simon, is there something I can do for you?"

"I would like to talk privately to you, Monsieur Lupin," Destin said, "if I may."

"Let's talk out here," Remus said before turning to kiss Cordelia on the cheek. "Go back inside; it's cold out here. I'll be back shortly."

Trusting her husband's judgment, and noting that he stood a good five inches over Destin, Cordelia decided to do as Remus said, and she shepherded both Dudley and Harry inside. Once alone, Destin acknowledged what Remus had already guessed. "You know what I am, don't you, Monsieur?"

"I do," Remus owned. "And I would say that you're also aware of what I am."

"I am," Destin acknowledged. "And I am rather surprised that Amelia has never mentioned that you are a werewolf, Monsieur, especially since I am aware that the British wizarding world is rather uptight about dark creatures."

"And I'm equally aware that despite the French wizarding world's more liberal approach to them, you have not made it public that the ministre de la Défense is a werewolf," Remus countered, his stance as stiff as Destin's.

Destin nodded towards the trees. "I think we should take this conversation away from the main house."

"I agree," Remus said as he fell into step with Destin. Feeling the tension in the air, Remus almost expected Destin to attack him at any moment, and he therefore voiced his inner thoughts. "So, are we going to fight or talk when we get to wherever you're going?"

Like Remus, Destin was well aware that two male werewolves in one location was usually bad news. "I would prefer a more civilized approach as I don't wish to explain to your wife why I left your bloody body lying out here."

Remus bristled visibly, and immediately went on the offensive. "Don't be so certain of your skills, Monsieur."

Destin growled low in his throat. "You would be surprised at my skills."

"I doubt it," Remus said in a confrontational voice. "But if we're going to fight, I think a venue more suitable than a party at which we're guests might be a good idea."

Destin forced himself to ignore his more primitive side, which was howling for him to try and rip Remus apart. "I apologize. My attitude was uncalled for and totally inappropriate."

Remus also forced himself to ignore the urge to attack this man. "And I should not have responded as I did."

Destin smiled deprecatingly. "I do believe that it is in our nature to be confrontational."

"Which is why I have to admit that I'm surprised you approached me," Remus said. "So what do you want?"

Tamping down the wolf in him at Remus' still somewhat antagonistic tone, Destin adopted a pleasant voice and harked back to his earlier comment. "First of all, I'd like to know whether Amelia is aware that the Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts is a werewolf."

Remus shook his head. "No. If she was, I would have to register with the Ministry, and I would not be allowed to teach at Hogwarts."

"What about the safety of the children?" Destin asked, ducking under a bush to step into a hollow strewn with fallen tree stumps.

Remus explained about the Whomping Willow. "And I also have access to Wolfsbane. If I did not, then I would remove myself from the premises entirely."

"I am glad to hear it considering my daughter is currently a guest at Hogwarts," Destin said.

"I am well aware of that fact," Remus acknowledged. "And now I have answered your questions, perhaps you would do me the courtesy of returning the favor."

"I have a cell in the basement of my home, and like you I also use Wolfsbane," Destin said. "My family is also never at home when I change, as I would rather not take a chance with their lives should something untoward happen."

Remus was hit with a wave of fierce love as Destin mentioned his family, but it was not Destin's family that he was interested in. "So does anyone at the French Ministry know of your condition?"

"Just my guérisseur, Franco de Blanc," Destin named his most trusted colleague and friend, before realizing that Remus might not understand. "He is my healer." He then went on. "I take it Dumbledore knows of your condition."

"He does, and it is he who had the Willow planted when I attended Hogwarts as a boy," Remus informed Destin.

Destin was horrified by the implications of Remus' admission. "You were bitten as a child?"

"Yes," Remus said, and he turned the question on Destin. "You?"

"I was attacked during my very first outing as an Auror." Destin shivered as he remembered the night his life had changed forever. "Franco spotted the bite and agreed to keep it quiet as a favor to my father, who was his best friend."

Aware that Destin must have still been quite young when it happened, Remus decided to move the conversation on to something more personal. "May I ask a question about your family?"

Destin wondered what Remus could want to know, and he hesitantly agreed. "Yes, as long as it is not too personal."

"Are your children normal?" Remus asked, as this was something that did worry him with both he and Cordelia wanting a child.

Normally Destin would have refused to answer such a blunt question, but he was aware that Remus was recently married and probably seeking to have a family and he therefore answered honestly. "None of them change on a full moon. But Georgiana is preternaturally strong and has excellent hearing but she has terrible vision. My other two daughters both have excellent hearing but unlike their older sister they are no stronger than a normal witch, and they both have normal vision. My youngest is only two months old and so far we're not certain what abilities she possesses, but she has also not changed at all."

This made Remus feel somewhat better about the possibility of having a child with Cordelia. "Thank you for telling me." He then turned to the reason Destin had sought him out. "So, I gather that you wished to talk to me about Harry. As you have already spoken to him, why did you not bring him out here rather than asking to speak to me?"

Destin could feel Remus' suspicion. "You will be able to detect if I am lying or untrustworthy; Monsieur Potter does not have that ability, and I doubt that you would have let me bring him out here alone."

"So what do you want to talk about?" Remus asked, now that Destin had dealt with one of his concerns.

Destin told him. "I want to talk about offering my help."

Remus frowned. "I know you are the ministre de la Défense but what makes you think you can help us in any way?"

"I do not know if you aware but there are rumblings that Voldemort has returned and that he has been recruiting here in France." Destin passed on what his operatives had so far been able to discover. "And as the ministre de la Défense I am aware of the prophecy that pertains to Monsieur Potter and Voldemort."

Given Destin's honesty, Remus decided to share what he also knew. "I spoke to Amelia a few days ago, and she relayed the same information about the rumblings to me. And it has me worried, particularly as when the Champions for the Triwizard Tournament

were being selected, Harry's name was extracted from the Goblet of Fire moments before it entered its final phase. At the time I was suspicious but given that nothing has happened since then, I decided that I was being oversensitive, and that it was simply a fan of Harry's who put his name in. Given both your confirmation and Amelia's, now I'm not so sure."

Destin was pleased that Remus was being open with him, and he revealed even more. "As you know, Voldemort had forays into France and Germany in the last war. I'm afraid that he will do so again but this time with more force, including attacking Hogwarts because of Monsieur Potter. I think, however, he will attack your Ministry first, and Amelia agrees with me. She is, of course, doing everything she can to prepare but after checking all of her staff time and time again, she has discovered none with a Dark Mark. Unfortunately your Minister disagrees with her about the danger."

Remus was already aware of Fudge's reticence to believe that Voldemort might surface again, especially given that the problems of LeStrange and Sirius had been dealt with. "Albus and I have discussed this, and we agree with Amelia. We are both therefore laboring under the assumption that given his previous fascination with Hogwarts, it is likely that Voldemort may attack if he does resurface."

"I concur," Destin agreed, and he pulled out a yellow ribbon. "Even though I'm well aware that you are very friendly with Amelia, given Monsieur Potter's importance, I still want to offer you a secondary source of help. This is impregnated with my daughter's scent, and if you should ever be in need of aid, then make sure that whoever needs my help is bearing it, Monsieur Lupin."

"Thank you, and I think you should call me Remus," Remus offered as he pocketed the ribbon. Then he grabbed Destin's arm, halting the smaller man's progress as he turned to return to the house. "Would you mind remaining a while? I would like to know everything you do about Voldemort's possible plans, and to talk about exactly what sort of help you think you might be able to offer if it came down it."

Destin sat down on a tree stump. "Then let's talk."

It was over two hours later when the two men returned to the house, chatting as though they had known each other all of their lives. Destin could see Cordelia heading their way. "I believe your wife is worried about you."

Remus had felt Cordelia's concern the moment he entered the ballroom. "She'll relax now that I'm back."

Destin held out his hand. "I wish you well, Remus."

"And I you, Destin." Remus shook hands, before walking off to join his wife.

Harry and Hermione, who had again taken Georgiana under their wing to spare her from Debbie's attentions, noticed the pair arriving back. "Whatever they wanted to discuss it took a while."

"It was probably about you," Hermione said, unable to think of anything else that the two men might have been discussing. She doubted that discussing their lupine nature would have taken the men so long.

"Papa is coming over," Georgiana noted, and she politely rose to her feet. "Are we leaving, Papa?"

"Not just yet," Destin said, placing a hand on Georgiana's shoulder, and addressing Harry and Hermione. "I simply wanted to take the opportunity to thank you both for taking care of my daughter while I talked with Remus."

Hermione was rather surprised at Destin's almost flawless English and she spoke to him in French. "You speak English very well, Monsieur Simon."

Destin smiled at the girl he had not yet been introduced to, but recalling Harry's comment earlier, he guessed who she was. "And you speak French very well, Mademoiselle Granger."

"Thank you," Hermione accepted Destin's compliment. "My parents taught me at a young age."

"And I speak English so well because my mother was English," Destin revealed. "But my father was French and I therefore consider France my home."

"I love France," Hermione told him. "My mother now lives here."

"I met her earlier this evening," Destin informed her, before reverting to English for Harry's sake. "And if you would all now excuse me, I believe I should check on what my other children are up to."

Georgiana sat back down when her father left. "My sisters are a little wild and Papa is worried they will embarrass us."

"I doubt they'll get up to much trouble in the nursery," Hermione said, Georgiana having already mentioned that her younger siblings were three and four, "which is more than I can say for my cousin."

All three children glanced over to where Debbie and her friends were giggling with George Weasley. Harry shook his head. "I really don't see what George sees in her."

Georgiana was surprised to hear this. "But she says that you like her greatly and she says no to your date." After interacting with Harry and Hermione, Georgiana had finally managed to get over her crippling shyness, and pluck up the courage to reveal what the girl who she had thought had been her friend had said.

Hermione snorted. "She's been chasing Harry for ages, and he had to be blunt with her and tell her no. I'm sure she only initially went out with George because I used to date him, and she wanted to get back at me because Harry defended me against her."

"Why?" Georgiana asked.

Hermione told her in brief about the showdown she had had with her cousin on the quidditch pitch. "But despite what Harry said, we were just friends."

"I thought you were a couple," Georgiana had to admit. "You were at the Ball together."

"And you were at the Ball with Nic, but you're not dating him," Harry pointed out, not revealing that he and Hermione were sort of a couple.

"He is a kind friend," Georgiana said, having met the Hufflepuff when she had knocked him over in a corridor. "And he knows that no-one wants to date someone who looks like me."

Hermione was well aware of how kind her cousin was, and that with his good looks he could have asked most of the girls at Hogwarts out and they would have said yes. "Nic is a wonderful person, and you might get to see more of him next year. He's applying to join the French Auror Division because BritAD aren't accepting new students next year."

Georgiana had also applied, and thinking that she might get to spend more time with a boy she truly liked, she blushed. However, she denied she had any feelings for Nic. "He is just a friend."

"Is that why he has danced with you three times tonight?" Hermione asked in a teasing voice.

"He is being kind," Georgiana protested. "And Dudley danced with me, and Harry is dancing with me three times and they are very kind also."

Hermione had herself danced with Harry five times, and she wondered if he was still trying to make up for their unsuccessful time at the Yule Ball. "At least dancing with Harry you still might have some toes left."

Georgiana giggled. Dudley had stomped all over her feet, but she had been grateful for the boy's kindness. "I think Harry dances most nice."

Harry grinned at the French girl. "You dance most nice too."

Georgiana blushed again. "Merci."

"I think your father is coming back over," Hermione said, spotting the fair haired man coming their way.

This time Destin was carrying two small children, one asleep on each shoulder, and he smiled at his eldest daughter. "I think that we should be leaving now, Georgiana. I have thanked our hosts, and if you would like to do the same, I will meet you in the foyer."

"Oui, Papa." Georgiana smiled fondly at her father, before turning to Harry and Hermione. "You are both very kind to me, and I thank you."

"I enjoyed actually getting to know you," Harry said, smiling. "I'll see you at Hogwarts."

Hermione and Georgiana exchanged hugs before the girl went off in search of the Fullers. Harry smiled at Destin. "I hope you have a nice holiday, Sir."

"You too, Monsieur Potter," Destin nodded, unable to shake hands. "Mademoiselle Granger, it was a pleasure."

"Goodnight, Sir." Hermione also smiled at the man, who then turned and left.

As Georgiana joined her father to go, Harry heard another ripple of laughter coming from Debbie and her friends. "Your cousin has to be the biggest bitch ever. Why did she invite Georgiana if she doesn't like her?"

Hermione rarely heard Harry talk negatively about anyone, but with Debbie she understood why he had been so rude. "She invited Georgiana because she's a status snob."

"So she had no interest in Georgiana?" Harry asked.

"Not a bit," Hermione said. "She only really started talking to her when Georgiana told us who her father was in November."

Harry was taken aback. "You knew who her father was before tonight?"

Hermione groaned. "For goodness sake, Harry. Sometimes you walk about with your head in the clouds. I think by now that most of Hogwarts knows who her father is."

"I didn't even realize she was a contestant," Harry had to admit. "It was only when I met her father that I decided she got through because of him."

"She got through on pure talent," Hermione said, correcting Harry. "Beauxbatons held competitions to determine who should be put forward to take part."

"I forgot." Harry had known but had simply dismissed it as unimportant and pushed it to the back of his mind. Spotting Nic he asked after him. "So does Nic really like her?"

"He said she was funny and interesting," Hermione passed on what she and her cousin had talked about that afternoon when they had arrived for dinner. "So I think he does like her. Nic isn't one to determine if he likes someone by looks alone."

As yet another ripple of laughter rang out, Harry looked from Nic to Debbie. "Are you sure one of them isn't adopted?"

Hermione giggled. "I know. It's hard to believe that they're related."

Noticing Luna on the dance with floor with Dudley, who had accepted Luna's decision about just being friends without any problem, Harry changed the subject. "I'm surprised Luna hasn't been hunting for a new target with Dudley falling through."

Hermione gave Harry a gentle slap on the arm. "Harry, that's just mean."

Harry simply shrugged. "She said herself after breakfast that she hoped to find someone here to go out with."

"How does she expect to find a Hufflepuff in France?" Hermione asked.

"She said she's decided to widen her horizons," Harry said. "I think she's run out of Hufflepuffs who might be husband material."

"I don't see what the obsession about finding a husband is," Hermione commented. "She's only fourteen."

"She'll be fifteen in February," Harry reminded Hermione. "And Luna said it's a pureblood thing. Many of them are engaged or married by the time they're seventeen or just after they leave school."

"Well, I think it's ridiculous," Hermione said firmly. "I have no intention of settling down until I'm well into my twenties or maybe older."

Harry already knew this. "I always hoped that I'd be married with children by then; at least I did until this Horcrux thing came up."

Hermione scowled at Harry's long face, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. "Harry, you are NOT going to die!"

"How do you know that?" Harry asked, suddenly feeling down.

"Because I wouldn't be wasting my time with being a sort of friend with benefits if I believed you were," Hermione said, smiling playfully at him, trying to lighten his mood.

Harry's gloom vanished almost immediately as he was reminded that he had sort of got the girl of his dreams. "Then would you care to dance with your sort of friend with benefits?"

"I would," Hermione said, and headed onto the dance floor with Harry.

As he danced with Hermione, Harry could only hope she was right about his not dying, particularly as Harry hated the idea that one day it might be someone else holding Hermione like this and not him. His thoughts were disturbed when Hermione gave a huge yawn. "Tired?"

Hermione nodded. "A little."

"Let's go home then," Harry suggested. And after telling Remus they were leaving, he operated the portkey he had and the couple vanished.

Next Chapter: Hermione has a hard decision to make; the second task in the Triward Tournament; Harry gets into a fight.

Chapter 56: The Second Task

February 20th, 2006

Hermione knocked on the Headmaster's door. "You wished to see me, Sir?"

"Come in, Miss Granger." Albus beckoned to her. "And please take a seat."

Hermione had initially been worried that something had happened to her mother but spotting the other occupants in the room, she guessed that it was most definitely not for that reason she had been summoned. "Thank you, Sir."

"I have already spoken to Miss Turpin and Mr. Weasley, and I expect you are wondering why you have been called here." Not waiting for answer, Albus went on. "As you may know, the second task is due to take place tomorrow, and for it to happen I require your agreement."

Hermione was a little confused as to why her agreement would be needed. "May I ask why, Sir?"

"The task involves the Champions recovering what they will miss most, namely you three," Albus explained.

Hermione was now even more confused. "I can understand why Fred and Lisa are here, but I barely know Natasha even though she's been staying in my dorm room."

"Miss Turpin is here for Mr. Vigier and Mr. Weasley is here for Miss Vladimir, not you," Albus told her.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. "So I'm here for George?"

"Yes," Albus confirmed.

"There must be some sort of mistake," Hermione protested.

"That is what Mr. Weasley here said," Albus revealed. "But I performed the necessary spell three times, and each time your

name appeared to indicate that you are most definitely what his brother would miss most."

"But I can't be," Hermione whispered almost to herself. "George is dating my cousin."

"I can perform the spell again if you so wish," Albus offered, just as he had done with Fred Weasley.

"Please," Hermione said immediately.

Albus waved his wand in the air. "Concupisco George Weasley Hogwarts Agonotheta."

Hermione watched as her name appeared in the air, and she dropped her head into her hands. "This isn't good."

Albus could see that Hermione was rather distressed. "Miss Granger, if you find this unacceptable, you are not obliged to take part."

Hermione's head shot up, her face filled with relief. "So you'll be able to substitute my cousin instead?"

"I'm afraid not," Albus informed her, before dropping an even bigger bombshell. "And if you do refuse to take part in the second task, then Mr. Weasley cannot enter it."

As soon as Albus finished speaking, Fred rose to his feet. "Hermione, I know things haven't been very good between us because of what happened with you and George." At Hermione's withering look, he gave her a sheepish smile. "Okay, they've been awful. But this is really important to George, and he'll be gutted if he can't take part."

Hermione swung around to face Albus. "Does George know what he's going to be doing?"

Albus shook his head. "Just that he has to seek what he will miss most."

"How do you know he won't go after Fred?" Hermione asked.

"You'll be marked by a Hogwarts scarf," Albus told her, not revealing that she would be underwater and unconscious. "Mr. Weasley will have a Durmstrang scarf, and Miss Turpin, one from Beauxbatons."

"Please, Hermione," Fred begged before Hermione could respond to Albus. "You have to do this."

Hermione got up and began pacing. "I don't know. If I take part I'm going to hurt Debbie, and if I don't, George will be upset."

In desperation, Fred dropped to his knees. "Please, please, say yes. You have no idea how much this means to George, and if you don't say yes then I may as well kill myself as he'll be impossible to live with."

"That's a little melodramatic, isn't it?" Hermione asked, a small smile reluctantly gracing her lips at Fred's amateur dramatics.

Fred shrugged. "Yes, but I'm telling the truth about George. He was so excited to be picked as the Champion, and if he can't take part it will tear him in two."

"And what about my cousin?" Hermione asked. "Don't you think that finding out that she's not what he wants most will hurt her?"

"Better to find out sooner rather than later," Fred said in a voice that signified he didn't really care whether Debbie got hurt or not.

Ignoring Lisa and the Headmaster, Hermione called Fred on it. "You don't like her, do you?"

"No," Fred said bluntly. "And to be quite truthful neither does anyone in my family."

Hermione frowned and crossed her arms. "So are you asking me to do this because you want Debbie out of George's life, or because you want him to win?"

"Both," Fred answered honestly. "But mostly it's because I know how much it means to George to have been chosen as Hogwarts' Champion. It's all he talked about during Christmas when Bill came home."

Although she wanted to say yes, Hermione was still undecided. "I don't know."

"If you won't do it for George, then think about the school," Fred suggested, aware that Hermione might still harbor ill feelings towards his brother, although George had told him that he and Hermione were now on speaking terms again. "Hogwarts will be let down if you don't agree."

Hermione sank back down onto her chair and groaned. "So my choices are to say yes and be hated by my cousin, or to say no and be hated by the entire school."

Lisa spoke up for the first time. "Why don't you leave the choice up to fate?"

Hermione turned around to look at her housemate. "What do you mean?"

Lisa fished inside of her pocket, and she pulled out a galleon, which she handed to Hermione. "As you truly can't decide what the better option is, flip the coin. Wizard's head you take part, dragon, you don't."

Aware that this was a problem that she would not be able to solve by using logic alone, Hermione took a deep breath and tossed the coin into the air.

The Next Morning

Harry glanced around him as he sat down. "I haven't seen Hermione this morning."

"She's probably in the library," Hannah suggested. "It's where she normally is before breakfast."

Harry had dropped by the library but hadn't spotted Hermione in there, but guessing that she had probably been in the back somewhere, he dismissed his slight worry. "I'll catch up with her after classes this morning."

But Harry still couldn't find Hermione at lunch, and noticing that Remus was absent, Harry made his way over to Albus, who was

sitting at the teachers' table. "I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch, Sir, but could I have a word?"

Albus guessed almost immediately what was up with Harry. "Of course. Come with me."

Harry ignored the faintly disgusted look that Severus threw his way, and he followed Albus to the end of the table and into the anteroom off the Great Hall. He had barely taken a step inside when he blurted out, "Hermione's missing."

"She's perfectly safe, Harry," Albus assured him. "She's doing something for me at the moment, but she'll be returned to you before dinner." Albus then started to move back towards the door signifying that the very brief talk was over.

With the Headmaster leaving, Harry felt pressured to accept what he had been told without complaint, and so he left the room to return to his table where he filled his friends in on what Albus had said. They had just finished their lunches when Albus stood up and made an announcement about the second task being about to start. Hannah turned to Justin. "Even given what Harry said, I was hoping that Hermione would be back in time for the second task."

"Hannah, she hasn't exactly been a big fan of the tournament from the start," Justin reminded his fiancée. "And I bet she'd rather be doing whatever it is that the Headmaster has assigned her; no doubt it's probably some sort of research."

Having overheard the couple's exchange, Harry decided that Justin was probably right. "I suppose we should go down to the lake then."

As Harry got up, Luna waved at him from the Ravenclaw table and made her way over. "Have you seen Hermione?"

"She's doing some research for the Headmaster," Hannah repeated what Justin had deduced.

"But she'll miss the second task," Luna protested, unknowingly echoing Hannah.

"Obviously she's not that bothered otherwise she would have been here, research or no research." Justin said, noticing as he did so

that the Great Hall was quickly starting to empty out. "Come on, we'd better go, otherwise we'll miss it as well."

Harry followed his friends out of the Great Hall and headed down towards the stands that had been erected beside the lake the night before. Seated next to Harry, Justin could see how concerned Harry still was. "If the Headmaster said she's okay, then she's okay, Harry."

"I just have a bad feeling about this," Harry said, unable to shake the feeling of doom that had settled over him.

He stopped speaking as Albus stood up and made an announcement. "Welcome to the second task. Our three Champions will assemble on the dock."

Hannah watched with interest as the three Champions shivered in their varied bathing suits. "I wouldn't want to be doing that."

Luna, who was sitting on Harry's other side, agreed with the girl. "Neither would I. I've got a coat on and I still feel chilled."

Harry's attention, however, was drawn back to the Headmaster as he announced the task facing the Champions, and Harry stiffened, shaking his head in dismay. "They have to find what they'd miss most, and Hermione is missing?"

Aware of what Harry was assuming, Justin shared a worried glance with Luna before speaking to Harry. "You don't know that Hermione is what George would miss most, Harry."

Harry didn't turn around as the Champions entered the water. "So the fact that Hermione is doing something for the Headmaster is just a bit of a coincidence?"

Ron, who was sitting with Susan on the row behind, interrupted them. "Actually, Fred is also missing and has been since yesterday. Professor Lupin said he's okay. George was worried sick when he vanished."

Justin felt a sense of relief at Ron's words. "See, Harry. It makes sense that Fred is what George would miss most."

"I get that, but with them both missing, it has to be something to do with this task," Harry said adamantly.

Luna placed a hand on Harry's arm. "You might be right about Hermione being part of this, but perhaps she's what Natasha would miss most. Natasha is sharing her dorm room."

At his friend's gentle touch, Harry reluctantly simmered down. "I suppose." But he found it difficult to concentrate and his anxiety levels rose again when thirty minutes later Natasha Vladimir appeared above the surface of the water together with a redheaded companion. Harry turned on Ron. "I thought you said Fred was what George would miss most."

Ron was more than confused. "But he's only been going out with Natasha for a couple of weeks. I didn't think she would choose him."

"Perhaps they had no choice in the matter," Susan sensibly suggested.

Harry heard a cheer go up and his stomach plummeted as he saw George cradling Hermione in the water. But his attention was returned to the stands, however, as a voice yelled his name.

"Oy, Potter!" Draco Malfoy called out. "I see your girlfriend has decided to go back to the Weasel. I wonder what he's got that you haven't. It can't be money. Perhaps it's because the Weasel is the school Champion and you're not."

Already entertaining the same thought himself, Harry swung around, anger bubbling easily to the surface as he responded to Draco. "Fuck you, Malfoy."

"Ooh, Potter's learnt how to swear," Draco said, laughing at Harry's apparent anger. "I'm frightened."

Harry just grew angrier at Draco's mocking, and he stood up, his wand flying into his hand. "Come here and say that and we'll see how frightened you are."

Draco also unholstered his wand. "As if I'd ever be afraid of you, Potter." Then, as he had in their first year, he challenged Harry to a duel. "Astronomy Tower, tonight at midnight."

"Name your second," Harry demanded.

"Zabini," Draco said without hesitation, not bothering to check if it was okay. "Yours?"

Angry at Draco for calling his brother 'Weasel', Ron jumped in before Harry could say anything. "I am."

Before Harry could thank Ron, a familiar, and not very happy, voice drifted up to the stands. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Malfoy, and Mr. Zabini, get down here now!"

Harry and Ron both scowled at Draco as if it was his fault as they made their way down to where Remus was standing. When Harry reached Remus, Harry's anger was still evident in the one word he used. "Sir?"

Remus caught the belligerent tone in Harry's voice. "You will show some respect when you address me, Mr. Potter."

Harry forced himself to try and calm down. "I'm sorry, Professor."

Remus slowly looked at each boy in turn, and then let them know that he had overheard their conversation, as had most of the school. "If I find any of you anywhere near the Astronomy Tower tonight or any other night with the intention of dueling, I will dock fifty points from each of your houses. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry and Ron both said in unison, neither of them wanting to lose points.

Blaise also offered up his agreement, but Draco glared at Harry before responding. "Yes, Sir."

Despite his warning, Remus had no intention of letting any of the boys get off scot-free. "As it is, starting tomorrow, you'll all be serving two detentions with Professor Flitwick."

Blaise immediately complained. "But I didn't say anything."

"So you weren't going to act as Mr. Malfoy's second?" Remus questioned the boy as to his intentions.

Unwilling to lose face and let down a fellow Slytherin, Blaise had little choice but to admit that he was. "I was, Sir."

"Then you're in detention with the others," Remus said.

"But Potter started it," Draco also complained, not wanting to serve detention with Harry and Ron.

"I heard who started it, Mr. Malfoy," Remus said, more than annoyed that Draco was arguing with him. "And I think we should make it three detentions for you. Or is there anything else you wished to say?"

"No, Sir," Draco snapped angrily, but not daring to continue the argument.

"Then you can return to your seats," Remus said. With the four boys heading back to their seats, Remus turned and began to walk away. As he did so, he caught Draco hissing angrily at Harry, "You'll pay for this, Potter."

Remus turned back around. "And ten points from Slytherin for threatening Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy." He then continued on his way.

Only once Remus had left the area did Draco turn back on Harry and Ron. "You two had better be there tonight, Potter."

Harry looked at Draco as if he was mad. "You heard him, Malfoy. I'm not losing my house fifty points, and neither is Ron."

"Chicken!" Draco goaded Harry.

"Better a chicken than an idiot," Ron said in a surprising move.

Still trying to wind up the two boys, Draco's gaze deliberately wandered over to where a shivering Hermione was being held by George as they were brought in by boat. "I'd say that Potter's the idiot. At least my girlfriend isn't hanging all over the school Champion, if you could call the Weasel that after losing to a girl."

Ron's restraint vanished and he went to surge forward, only to be stopped by Harry, who himself was doing his best to resist the temptation to hex Draco. "He's not worth it, Ron."

Despite Remus' warning, Draco was itching for a fight with Harry, and he therefore resorted to a more base response. "I bet the Weasel doesn't say that about your girlfriend when he's shagging her."

Fed up of Draco belittling his brother, Ron hit back before Harry could respond. "At least she doesn't look like a pig."

"Parkinson might look like a pig but at least she knows her place," Draco retorted, ignoring the hurt look on Pansy's face, "which is more than I can say for Potter's Mudblood bitch."

Draco's attempt to rile Harry finally worked but not in the way he expected. Losing his temper at the slur, instead of trying to hex Draco, Harry launched himself forward onto the surprised boy.

Hearing the words 'fight, fight, fight,' being shouted and cheers going up, Remus span around to spot a crowd gathering around something he couldn't see on the stairway leading back into the stands. But having just left Harry and Draco there, he guessed that it had to be something to do with them. Hearing the cheers growing louder, Remus hurried back the way he had come, parting the crowd as he reached it. His suspicions about who was involved were confirmed when he reached the center of the crowd and discovered Harry pounding Draco as hard as he could with his fists. Remus bent down, grabbed Harry by the arm and yanked him up and onto his feet. "What the hell is going on?"

Ron, who had thoroughly been enjoying watching Harry beat the tar out of Draco, tried to explain. "It was Malfoy's fault, Sir. He was being disgusting about George and Hermione, and he called her a Mudblood."

Remus looked down at Draco who was in no condition to answer back. Instead he turned to Luna, whom he trusted to be honest with him. "Is this true?"

"Yes, Sir," Luna readily told the truth, happily clarifying what Ron had said. "Malfoy was making obscene comments about Hermione and George."

"And who struck the first blow?" Remus asked, continuing to looking pointedly at Luna.

She really didn't want to answer this time as she would be dropping Harry in it, but aware that Remus would know if she was lying, Luna had little choice but to reluctantly tell the truth. "Harry did, Sir."

Remus looked at Harry's face, which although it was bloody, was barely marked. "Fifty points from Hufflepuff for fighting, and two weeks detention with Professor Snape. Now return to your house, Mr. Potter."

Still fuming, Harry stomped off. With Harry gone, Remus helped an obviously dizzy Draco to his feet. As Draco stared in an unfocussed fashion at Remus, Remus decided his punishment could wait. "Mr. Zabini, help Mr. Malfoy to the nurse. Tell him I'll be along to inform him what I've decided about his punishment when he's recovered enough to make sense of what I'm saying."

Then he turned to face the large group of students who had been egging the fight on. "And speaking of punishments, for failing to intercede, you will all attend a detention with me in the Great Hall tomorrow night, no exceptions."

Those who felt they had been unfairly judged grumbled under their breaths, but it was obvious that Remus was far from amused, and so they said nothing out loud, except for Ron. "But we didn't do anything wrong."

Remus begged to differ. "You stood by and let Mr. Potter almost beat Mr. Malfoy into unconsciousness, Mr. Weasley. And since you're already attending a detention with Professor Flitwick tomorrow night, you will spend your night's detention with me when your detentions with him are up."

Ron continued to complain bitterly. "But Malfoy asked for it. He said that Hermione was sha..."

Remus interrupted Ron, getting the gist of the conversation. "That still does not change the fact that this fight should not have been encouraged, Mr. Weasley. Now unless you want me to add a few more days onto the detentions you already have, I suggest you be quiet."

Ron opened his mouth to form the word 'but', only to close it again when Susan elbowed her boyfriend in the ribs.

"A sensible move, Miss Bones," Remus said, and then he turned to everyone. "I do not want to find cause to return here again. And if I find anyone else fighting or being insulting, then their house will lose two hundred points and they will be in detention until the end of the year. Do I make myself clear?"

There were hurried nods and a few hushed yeses. Satisfied that he had made himself patently clear, Remus headed off to the tent that Madam Pomfrey had got set up by the dock.

On his way back to Hogwarts, Harry passed by the landing area where Hermione had just been seen by Madam Pomfrey, who had wrapped her in a blanket. Spotting Harry and the blood that covered his face, Hermione rushed over to him. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry turned around to face Hermione. "I got into a fight with Malfoy."

"Harry, you should know better than that," Hermione said in an annoyed tone. "You..."

Harry was in no mood to be lectured by Hermione and he therefore interrupted her. "I did it because he called you a Mudblood and said you were shagging Weasley."

Hermione glanced behind her at George who was involved in a heated discussion with Debbie. "He was just trying to wind you up, Harry."

"Well, he managed it!" Harry snapped, still more than a little angry. "That little bastard made me lose points, and I've got two weeks of detentions with Snape."

Hermione placed her hand on Harry's arm, trying to get him to calm down. "Harry, you shouldn't have gotten so angry. You know very well there's nothing between George and me."

"So is that why you're what he'd miss most?" Harry asked, bringing up the reason why he had been put in such an untenable position in the first place.

"George didn't know that before the task," Hermione said, defending George. "I was called to the Headmaster's office last night, and Professor Dumbledore used a spell to determine what it would be that George would have to seek, and my name came out."

Harry felt his anger begin to rise again at Hermione's words. "So you knew what was going to happen yesterday?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "But if I hadn't agreed to do it, then George would have been unable to take part in the task."

Harry's anger grew even more as he realized what this meant. "You could have said no?"

With a sinking feeling, Hermione told the truth. "Yes."

Harry glanced over his shoulder to where George had just been slapped, the sound echoing around the dock. "Obviously your cousin must have just found that out."

Hermione could now hear the anger in Harry's voice. "Harry, please, I..."

Harry interrupted her. "You must have known that this would upset me, to say nothing of your cousin."

"I did, but..." Hermione tried to plead her case.

Harry shook his head in disgust and turned away. "I don't want to hear it, Hermione."

"Harry, please. We need to talk about this," Hermione said, the blanket dropping down around her feet as she tried to keep up with Harry as he stormed off again.

"Well, I don't want to talk to you," Harry said heatedly, unable to look at her.

Hermione tried to reason with Harry. "Harry, I had to do it."

"Liar!" Harry snarled. "You just told me you could have said no. But oh no, you had to put Weasley first."

"It wasn't like that," Hermione said, tears coming to her eyes. "Please, Harry."

Deciding to step in, George left Debbie sobbing into her friend's arms and hurried over to stand beside Hermione. "Harry, Hermione isn't to blame."

Harry's anger overrode his commonsense at George's actions. "Perhaps Malfoy was right about you two."

Hermione paled. "Harry, you know that's not true."

"I don't believe you," Harry said, now feeling angrier with Hermione than he had with Draco, and turning his wand towards the broom shed he yelled out, "Accio Harry Potter's Nimbus 2000."

"Harry, where are you going?" Hermione asked as the broomstick flew over her head and into Harry's hand.

"I don't know but as long as it's away from here, I don't care," Harry said as he mounted the broomstick.

Having just spoken to Draco and given him exactly the same punishment as Harry had received, except for detentions with him instead of Severus, on his way back up to the school Remus could quite clearly hear the argument that was in progress. Hurrying to its source, he was hit with the battering ram of Harry's anger. Spotting Harry sitting astride his broomstick, Remus immediately issued a warning. "Don't even think about it, Harry!"

Looking around him at Hermione's pleading face, at George standing so close to her, and at Remus' angry face, and then spotting Debbie heading their way, Harry almost felt as though he would suffocate if he stayed, and so, without a second thought for

the consequences, he flew off, disappearing the moment he cleared the wards surrounding the school.

George turned to a tearful Hermione. "I'm really sorry."

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't your fault."

Remus interrupted them. "Mr. Weasley, I think you should get that lip looked at."

George put a hand to his mouth to discover that it was bleeding. He was, however, more concerned about Hermione, and he therefore dismissed the cut. "It will heal. I think making sure that Hermione is okay is more important."

Debbie, who had come up behind the trio, turned on her former boyfriend. "You made that perfectly clear just now. I can't believe I encouraged you to be nice to her, and all this time you were still sniffing after her."

George reached out to touch Debbie's arm only for her to pull away. "I really thought I was over her, and I'm truly sorry if I hurt you."

Not believing him, Debbie hissed, "I hope you rot in hell, you lying bastard!" She then turned her back on George to lambast the other party she thought was responsible for her upset. "This is just as much your fault, Granger. You weren't content to only land the Boy Who Lived, were you? You just had to have George as well."

Hermione met Debbie's bitter gaze. "I don't want George, Debbie. I only took part because..."

"I know why you took part," Debbie snapped, tears running down her cheeks. "To show off like you always do, you bitch."

Deciding that things were getting out of hand, and not wanting another fight occurring, Remus interceded. "Miss Granger had little choice but to take part, Miss Fuller, otherwise Mr. Weasley would have been ineligible to enter the second task."

"I'd rather he had failed," Debbie sniffed. "I hate them both, and I never want to speak to either of them again."

It was too much for Hermione and the tears that had been threatening since Harry's departure now began to fall. George then made things worse by taking Hermione into his arms as she began to weep. Debbie gave a frustrated howl and ran off.

Remus closed his eyes momentarily, more than a little frustrated at the turn of events that the second task had caused. "I think you had better go after her, Mr. Weasley."

George looked over Hermione's head as she sobbed unrestrainedly into his chest. "She's already told me to go to hell, Sir. I can't see her changing her mind. I think someone had probably better go looking for Harry; at least Debbie headed into the school."

Remus decided that George was right and he left the couple alone.

George apologized when Hermione looked up. "I'm so sorry. I honestly didn't know. I truly thought I was over you."

Hermione pulled away from George, and wiped her face on the blanket that was still around her. "I believe you."

George let his arms drop to his side. "You obviously knew though that I wasn't, and that by taking part it would end things between me and Debbie. So why did you do it?"

Upset, Hermione missed the hopeful tone in George's voice. "I should have refused to do it but I didn't know what else to do. Fred said it meant everything to you to be part of this, and I didn't want the school to hate me again."

George had half-hoped that Hermione had taken part because she still had feelings for him. "Hermione, the fact that you did means a lot to me. Mum and Dad are finding it hard to make ends meet, and if I could win the prize money, it would help no end."

Hermione experienced a small flash of relief that she had taken part for George's parents' sake, but it was quickly overridden by her concern about Harry. "I'm sorry to hear that but I still shouldn't have done it. I've hurt Debbie, and most importantly, I've hurt Harry."

George could not hide the look of misery that crossed his face, as Hermione's mention of Harry crushed the final kernel of hope inside of him. "So there's no chance for us at all?"

Hermione sighed heavily, and was brutally honest with him. "George, even after what's happened between us, I still care about you very much. But there's only person I want to be with, if he'll still speak to me after this."

"Harry?" George asked in a defeated voice, revealing he already knew the answer.

Hermione nodded. "I'm sorry, George." Spotting Luna coming her way, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I have to go."

Supreme Fish & Chip Shop, Redhill

Harry glanced over at the door as it opened. "I should have known you'd find me."

"I'd exhausted everywhere else I could think of until I remembered taking you here for your birthday." Tonks dropped into the seat opposite Harry. "Everyone's worried sick, Harry."

Having calmed down, Harry now rather regretted storming off. "I didn't mean to worry anyone, but I just couldn't stay there. I was really angry and needed some time to cool down and think things through."

Tonks placed a comforting hand on his arm. "I understand, Harry, but I should warn you that Remus is furious about what you've done."

Harry was not surprised to hear this. "Is he going to expel me?"

Having volunteered to be a member of the search party, Tonks had missed the teachers' meeting to discuss Harry's actions. She therefore truly had no idea what had gone on at Hogwarts but she did know that Remus had been spitting mad at Harry's disappearing act. "At the end of the day, I think that it's up to the Headmaster and your Head of House."

Harry was well aware though that it had not been one of them who he had disobeyed. "Then I suppose I had better face the music and find out."

Tonks could remember only too well what it had been like at school, particularly with rivals and love issues, and so she took pity on Harry. "Do you want to stay for a while and talk?"

Knowing that he would be now unable to talk for worrying about what punishment might be awaiting him, Harry shook his head. "I'd better go back."

"Then let's go," Tonks said, getting to her feet.

Harry followed Tonks out, his mind on what was to come. "Thanks for finding me."

"I'm just glad you're safe." Tonks placed her hand on Harry's shoulder and apparated them both back to the school.

It turned out to be a very angry Remus, and not the Headmaster or his Head of House, who was waiting to see Harry. "In my office now."

Harry headed in, wincing as Remus loudly shut the door. "I..."

Remus interrupted him. "I don't want your excuses, Harry."

"It's not an excuse," Harry argued. "I saw red and lost my temper when Malfoy called Hermione a Mudblood bitch."

Remus disagreed. "It's still an excuse. You should have ignored him and walked away."

"Would you have been able to do the same if someone had been as rude about Cordie?" Harry asked, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"Yes," Remus answered truthfully. But he could tell that Harry did not believe him. "Why do you find it so hard to believe?"

"Because you're a werewolf," Harry said, pointing out what he thought was the obvious.

"And that is why I have to ignore slurs and walk away," Remus said. "Because if I didn't, and I had been in the same position that you were in today, then I would have killed Mr. Malfoy. As it was, you hit him hard enough to break his nose and knock out several of his teeth."

Harry had not given a second thought to what he had done to Draco. "He deserved it."

"Maybe so," Remus admitted, having spoken to Justin about what had happened after everything had calmed down. "But that still did not give you the right to behave like a wild animal."

Harry asked the same question he had of Tonks. "Am I going to be expelled for what I've done?"

"It was discussed," Remus revealed. "However, because you were severely goaded, and because of Mr. Malfoy's inappropriate use of language, it was decided that you are going to be given a second chance."

Harry was relieved but he could not help remarking about Severus. "I'm surprised Snape didn't want me out."

"Amazingly, no," Remus said, having also been surprised that Severus had not been as vocal as he had expected him to be. "But given that Mr. Malfoy is partly to blame for what happened here today, I believe Professor Snape had little choice but to go with the majority." Remus did not tell Harry that, in a surprising turn of events, the only member of staff to call for Harry's expulsion had been Professor Flitwick.

"So what's going to happen to me?" Harry asked, not expecting to be let off lightly.

"Your original punishment still stands," Remus said, before going on. "And in addition, for failing to obey me and return to Hogwarts, you will also lose another fifty points and serve two weeks of detentions with me and two weeks with Professor Viking. Also you are banned from Hogsmeade until the end of the year."

"Yes, Sir." Harry accepted his punishment without argument, and he brought up the subject of what was now bothering him the most. "Is Hermione angry with me?"

"Should she be?" Remus asked, not revealing whether he knew the answer to Harry's question or not.

Harry's head drooped. "Yes. I accused her of taking part in the task because she still likes George."

"And do you really think that's why she took part?" Remus asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, but I was angry and lashed out, and I didn't want to hear what she had to say."

"Then you've probably answered your own question about Hermione's feelings towards you at the moment," Remus said. "But if you want to know the truth about why she took part, then you'll have to ask her."

"I will," Harry said, before asking another question of Remus. "You're really angry with me, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, Harry," Remus said, not about to deny it. "You behaved like a petulant child today, and I expected better from you, of all people."

Harry scowled as he misinterpreted Remus' reasoning behind his expectations. "Because I'm the Boy Who Lived?"

Feeling Harry's anger flare up again, Remus sighed in exasperation. "Not at all. I expected better of you because you're my charge, and since you came into my care, I would like to think that I've managed to instill some sense of what is right and wrong. But obviously I must be mistaken."

At Remus' words, Harry's anger faded as quickly as it had reignited to be replaced by shame. "I'm sorry I let you down, Sir."

Remus still did not spare Harry. "You did, Harry." He pointed at the door. "You may go."

Cordelia looked questioningly at her husband as he told her what he done. "I think you went overboard, Remus. With all those detentions, he'll never get any revising done for his OWLS."

"He should have thought about that before he went off today," Remus retorted, before going on to vindicate his decision. "Harry broke half a dozen school rules not to mention frightening the living daylights out of me by vanishing like that."

Cordelia slipped onto Remus' lap and started to nuzzle his neck, speaking as she did so. "He was upset about Hermione. Wouldn't you feel the same way if that were me?"

"Yes, probably more so in fact," Remus admitted. "But I wouldn't have reacted in the same way as Harry did."

"He was simply defending a girl he cares a great deal about," Cordelia argued, as her hands began to unbutton Remus' shirt so that she could kiss his chest.

Remus stopped her in her motions by grabbing her hands. "Are you trying to get me to go easy on Harry? Because if you are, quite frankly I'm really not in the mood."

Cordelia tugged free and slid off Remus' lap, more than a little irritated by his comment. "I actually thought it might help you to relax."

"And you just happened to mention that I should go easy on Harry while you were trying to seduce me?" Remus asked, his voice more than a little sarcastic.

"Yes," Cordelia said, starting to feel angry. "But my intentions were far from trying to seduce you into going easy on him."

Remus rose to his feet. "It didn't seem that way to me."

Cordelia's voice took on a sugary, sarcastic quality as she responded to Remus. "So what you're saying is that I'm prostituting myself in order to get Harry off lightly?"

Suddenly aware that he had gone too far, Remus immediately began to backpedal. "What else did you expect me to think, Cordie?"

"I expected you to think that I wanted to offer you a little comfort after a trying day, and that you might like to talk about what had happened in a rational matter, but obviously I was wrong," Cordelia barked out, and she turned and headed towards the bedroom. She then gave a sickly sweet smile and spoke in a sugary voice again. "I do hope you find the sofa comfortable."

Remus winced as his wife slammed the door as hard she could. He then dropped down on to what was supposed to be his bed for the night.

Cordelia ignored the tap on the door that came ten minutes later, tugging the blanket over her head when it opened. "Get out!"

Remus finally did what he should have done during their argument and used his abilities to sense Cordelia's emotions. He felt immensely guilty as he was hit by hurt, misery, and anger. "Cordie, I'm sorry. I was out of order."

Cordelia didn't move but agreed with Remus. "Yes, you were."

Remus went on. "I accused Harry of behaving poorly today, and I did exactly the same thing, because like him, I was in a bad mood and I took it out on the person I love most."

Loathing arguments, Cordelia quickly relented at Remus' soft and remorseful tone, and she sat up, letting the blanket pool around her waist. "I probably shouldn't have mentioned Harry when I did."

Feeling more confident that she was not going to throw something at him, Remus entered the bedroom and sat down on the bed. "You were just trying to help, and I read too much into it. And for that I'm truly sorry."

Satisfied that he was genuinely sorry, Cordelia kicked off the covers and moved so that she could sit on Remus' lap. "In that case I forgive you."

Remus wrapped his arms tightly around his wife, burying his face into her neck. "I love you."

"I love you," Cordelia returned the sentiment, before sighing. "Our first real argument and it was over Harry."

Remus lifted his head up. "They always say that families are the biggest cause of stress."

"And we do have rather a large one," Cordelia said, considering all the children, even Hermione, as part of their family.

Remus shifted Cordelia so that she was now leaning against his chest. "Do you still want to add to it?"

Cordelia could hear the doubt in his voice. "Remus, I'm not going to change my mind about trying for a baby just because we had a problem with Harry."

"A baby will add more stress," Remus pointed out, "especially if it's different."

"Each one of our crazy family is different," Cordelia countered, aware that Remus was still worrying about the lupine aspect of having a child, even after his chat with Destin. "Luna's more grounded than she was but sometimes I have no idea where she gets her notions from; Dudley is insecure and worries that one of us will die on him, even though he won't tell anyone else that; Justin is so Hannah focused I sometimes worry that he's ignoring everything else, and Hermione is just as narrow-minded about her schoolwork; and as for Harry, he's got too many worries that a kid his age shouldn't have."

Remus sighed as he thought about Harry. "Do you really think I was too hard on him?"

"Yes," Cordelia answered. "Harry is probably even more insecure than Dudley in some respects. According to Justin, Harry's liked Hermione for a very long time, and with George being the school Champion, I think Harry truly believed that Hermione would prefer George over him. And with Hermione not being able to tell Harry about her participation beforehand, Malfoy's taunting, and George defense of Hermione, those fears just grew until they exploded."

"She seemed to be what Harry was worried about most," Remus admitted, and he lifted Cordelia to her feet. "I think I'm going to go and talk to him."

"Now?" Cordelia asked in surprise.

"Yes." Remus said, deciding it could not wait. "I was so angry at what he'd done that I didn't give him a chance to explain, and given what you've said, I have the feeling that he's probably lying in bed worrying. I shouldn't be long."

Harry rolled over as he heard the door open. Sitting up, he spotted a familiar silhouette in the dimly lit doorway. "Sir?"

"Come with me," Remus ordered.

More than a little apprehensive, Harry climbed out of bed and picked up his robe, before heading out of the dormitory.

Remus said nothing as they made their way to his office. Once inside, he closed the door. "You've been crying."

Harry did not deny it. "I hate that I've let everyone down."

"Come here," Remus said, opening up his arms.

Harry went straight into them, his tears beginning afresh at the comfort Remus was offering. "I'm so sorry I acted like that today. But Malfoy got me really angry."

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Horcrux, or was it just you?" Remus asked, not having considered this until that moment.

"It was me," Harry said honestly. "I know George is better than me, and..." Harry broke off before his voice strengthened and he continued. "And now Hermione is going to hate me and definitely go back to him."

"I doubt that," Remus said, stroking Harry's back. "Hermione likes you Harry, and while she might be angry with you at the moment, I suspect she'll be willing to forgive you if you apologize."

Harry felt a glimmer of hope. "Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely," Remus said, having been aware of how distressed Hermione had initially been about the possibility of Harry not speaking to her, before anger had set in.

Now feeling a little more reassured, Harry pulled free of Remus' grasp. "I'm sorry for crying all over you."

"Crying is just simply a way of venting anger, frustration, or, in your case, sadness and disappointment," Remus said, aware that Harry was feeling uncomfortable. "I cried when I was reunited with Sirius, and I'm not embarrassed to admit it."

"Because you were happy?" Harry asked, thinking of another possible reason for tears.

"And because I was ashamed that I had not believed in him," Remus said, giving Harry a little insight into him. "He was my best friend and I should have listened to him."

Harry could parallel his own situation with Remus'. "Just like I should have listened to Hermione."

"And I'm sure that you're going to make up for it tomorrow," Remus said quite rightly, before moving on. "Harry, Cordie believes that I was a little too harsh when it came down to dealing with you. Do you think the same?"

Harry thought about it for a few minutes before responding. "No, but I would rather do more detentions than lose points for my house. It wasn't Hufflepuff's fault that I blew my top."

Remus was pleased that Harry was shouldering the responsibility of what he had done. "In that case, I will give back fifty points, but you will have to earn the other fifty back. And in exchange you will have a further week's worth of detentions with me."

Like Cordelia had pointed out to Remus, Harry was rather worried about keeping up with his schoolwork, but given that Remus had been decent enough to give back half of the points he had lost, Harry refrained from complaining. "Thanks."

"Also," Remus watched Harry's face take on a worried look, "I will ask that Lucy merely monitor you while you work on your homework and research during your detentions with her. And the same will be applied during my detentions with you."

Harry let out a massive sigh of relief. "Thank you, Sir."

Remus gave Harry a warning. "However, I can't step in and dictate what will happen during Severus' detentions with you."

Harry grimaced. "I'll probably be up until midnight washing out dirty cauldrons."

"Probably," Remus agreed. "But Mr. Malfoy will also be doing something similar."

Harry looked quizzically at Remus. "But history doesn't get you dirty."

"I have something in mind that will," Remus said, although he did not reveal that he intended to have Draco scrub the graffiti off every dirty desk in Hogwarts he could find for the boy to clean.

Harry smiled at Remus, delighted that Draco would be sharing a similar fate. Then he became serious. "I'm really sorry about how I behaved today."

Remus could feel true contrition coming from Harry. "I know, Harry." He looked at the time. "It's almost one o'clock, so I had better escort you back to your house."

Once inside Hufflepuff house Harry turned to Remus. "Goodnight, Sir."

"Goodnight, Harry." Remus took Harry's face between his hands and kissed the top of his forehead. "Sleep well."

Harry felt tears come to his eyes yet again, aware from Remus' gesture that his guardian had forgiven him. Harry wrapped his arms around Remus' waist. "I love you."

Remus had never heard this from Harry before, so he was taken by surprise and more than a little touched. "I love you too, Harry." After dropping yet another kiss on the top of Harry's head, he stepped away. "Off to bed or you won't be able to get up in the morning."

The Next Day

Not having had an opportunity to talk to Hermione during lessons that day, and not wanting to approach her in the Great Hall, Harry waited until he knew she would be in the library to speak to her. "Hi."

Hermione's initial upset had long worn off, and the anger that Remus had hinted that she was feeling, was very much evident. "Harry, what can I do for you?"

"You could let me apologize," Harry said.

Like Remus, Hermione was not about to go easy on Harry. "For what?"

"For accusing of you of wanting to take part in the second task because you were still interested in George," Harry said, hoping that this was what she wanted to hear.

It was. "So why wouldn't you listen to me when I tried to tell you that?"

"Because I was still angry at Malfoy for insulting you and at Remus for punishing me," Harry admitted. "And I took it out on you. I'm really, really sorry."

"I accept your apology," Hermione said and dropped her head back down to continue her homework.

Harry was more than a little dumbfounded, having expected her to say more to him. "Aren't we going to talk about this?"

Hermione looked up. "You told me you were sorry, and I accepted your apology. What else is there to say?"

"I'd like to know why you took part," Harry said, still standing like a naughty schoolboy in front of Hermione.

Hermione put down her quill. "Why?"

Harry had not expected to be put on the spot like that. "Um, because I know it's not for the reason I thought it was, and I would really like to know why you did it."

Although she was still angry at Harry, Hermione was aware that she was going to have to discuss it with him eventually, and she therefore nodded at the chair next to her. "I did it because I felt backed into a corner."

This did not really answer Harry's question. "What do you mean?"

"The Headmaster told me that George would not be able to take part if I refused to participate, and I felt guilty when Fred went as far as begging on his knees to try to get me to do it because he knew how much it meant to George," Hermione said.

"But you must have known it would upset Debbie," Harry said, finally sitting down.

"I did and at the time I didn't know what to do for the best," Hermione told him. "Either way I was going to upset someone, and so I decided to take Lisa's suggestion and leave it up to fate."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, having no idea what she was talking about.

Hermione explained what had happened. "...and when the wizard's head came up, I decided to put my trust in fate."

"I wish fate had been gone the other way," Harry said glumly.

"So do I," Hermione owned, having come to regret her decision. "Debbie lit into me after you disappeared about not only hogging the Boy Who Lived, but also trying to steal her boyfriend."

Harry winced. "I suppose she regrets telling George to make it up to you at Christmas."

"Seeing as she said she never wants to speak to me again, I'd say so," Hermione said, before tears started trickling down her cheeks, her anger dissipating in the wake of her upset.

Harry immediately moved to take her hand. "I'm sorry."

Hermione was aware that while he had messed up, this part was not Harry's fault. "I could have said no and not gone with the stupid coin idea but I didn't know what else to do. And when the dragon's head came up, I decided to go along with it, mostly because I felt guilty about George not being able to compete if I didn't, and because I didn't want the whole school to hate me."

As she talked, Harry tugged Hermione to her feet and led her into the back of the stacks away from prying eyes. "The whole school wouldn't have hated you."

"Yes, they would," Hermione argued. "I was ostracized for simply splitting up with George, so how do you think everyone would have dealt with the fact that I had stopped him from entering the second task?"

Harry winced. "I'm sorry, I didn't think."

Hermione sat down on a window bench. "I know."

Harry knew that she was not just talking about that moment. "Hermione, I should never have said what I did about you and George."

Hermione wiped away the tears that were now slowing. "Why would you ever think that I still wanted George?"

"Because he's the school Champion, he's funny, popular, and he's good looking." Harry listed what he believed were George's best qualities.

Hermione thought about it for a moment before responding. "Harry, George is all of those things but he's also not you. He doesn't make shiver when he kisses me, and he doesn't make me come out in goose bumps when he smiles at me." Hermione gave Harry a bit of a smile. "And he's a lousy dancer."

"And he liked Debbie," Harry added, feeling a little more relaxed now that Hermione was smiling at him again.

Hermione's smile vanished. "I think she really liked him as well, and I messed it up."

"It wasn't your fault," Harry said, tentatively putting his arm around Hermione. "And let's be honest, it's not as if she's the nicest person on the planet. Look at how she treated Georgiana."

"Fred said that no-one in his family likes her," Hermione revealed, feeling a little better now that Harry had pointed out that her cousin was hardly a nice girl.

"I know she's your cousin, Hermione," Harry said, "but do you really like her at all?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but I would never have hurt her without good reason."

"And you had good reason," Harry said, not wanting Hermione to feel bad, "even if I refused to see it yesterday."

Hermione decided that Harry had been made to suffer enough. "Harry, I understand why you were jealous, even though it was rather stupid of you. And I really have accepted your apology, so we're good again."

Harry twisted around to face Hermione. "So you still want to go out with me?"

"I thought we were just sort of friends with benefits," Hermione said, intending to tease but her intention backfired.

Harry visibly drooped. "After yesterday I thought that maybe we had gone beyond that."

"So does this mean that you're a little less worried about getting close to me?" Hermione asked.

Harry gave a wry smile. "I think after how angry I got yesterday, if anything was going to happen it would have happened then, and it didn't."

Hermione had to agree with him. "So the answer to my question is yes?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"I'm glad," Hermione said, thoroughly relieved that their argument was now over.

Harry looked around, and not spotting any sign of the librarian, he tugged Hermione until she was sitting on his lap. "Can I kiss you?"

"If you promise me that in future you'll try to control your temper, and that you won't just run away from a problem, then you can," Hermione said, wanting Harry to know that although she had forgiven him, how he had reacted had been a mistake.

Harry got it, and he agreed without reservation to Hermione's demand. "I promise, and I'm sorry for reacting like I did."

"Then you can kiss me," Hermione said, closing her eyes.

Harry made the most of her acquiescence and kissed her until she was breathless. "I think I'm going to enjoy being your proper boyfriend."

Hermione grinned. "And I'm going to enjoy being able to tell everyone that I'm really going out with the Boy Who Lived."

Harry shook his head. "No, you can't."

Hermione's face fell. "Why not?"

"Because you're going out with Harry Potter, and not the Boy Who Lived," Harry said, his happy face also vanishing.

Hermione could have kicked herself. "My turn not to think."

"You can make it up to me by kissing me," Harry said, smiling once more.

Hermione did as Harry suggested, but when she pulled free she looked at her watch. "As much as I'd like to spend more time with my boyfriend, I think you'd better be off. Aren't you in detention with Professor Flitwick in five minutes?"

Harry swore softly under his breath and gently pushed Hermione off his lap. When the two of them reached the main part of the library again, Hermione sat down. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

Hermione was a little surprised when instead of answering her, Harry leant down, kissing Hermione in full view of everyone, confirming what everyone had suspected but had not known for certain until then. "Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Harry," Hermione said, and she dipped her head down once more, intending to resume work on her homework. But instead, she sat at the table with a happy smile on her face, her homework forgotten for once, as she contemplated the fact that she could finally say that she was Harry Potter's girlfriend.

Next Chapter: Harry spots a familiar face; Sirius is attracted to the wrong person; Fawkes makes an alarming delivery as Tom's plan swings into action.

Chapter 57: A Surprise Delivery

6th April 2006 - Easter

Harry came up for air, dropping his head onto Hermione's shoulder. "I thought we said on Wednesday that we were going to slow things down and put some space between us."

"Don't you like kissing me?" Hermione asked impishly, which was quite unlike her.

"You know I do," Harry retorted, finally looking up and noticing that Hermione's cheeks were a little flushed and that she was smiling. Guessing that distance was the last thing that Hermione really wanted between them, Harry decided to make the most of the time they had managed to sneak together. "Do you want me to prove it?"

Hermione's smile widened and she slid her hands under Harry's tee-shirt. "Only if you want to."

With Hermione rather boldly running her hands over his back, Harry most definitely wanted to. And so he quickly sought out Hermione's mouth again, while at the same time slipping his hand under Hermione's top to cup her naked breast, her bra long having been discarded.

With their kisses growing more intense, Harry's free hand travelled down to grasp Hermione's bottom over her skirt so that he could hold her more tightly against him. Feeling how excited Harry had grown, Hermione aided Harry in his efforts by wriggling and trying to get even closer to him. Encouraged, Harry removed his hand from Hermione's bottom, and placed it on her thigh, letting it travel up her leg until he was once again cupping her bottom, but this time under her skirt.

This was the furthest they had gone so far, and as she kissed Harry, Hermione found herself wondering if he would actually dare to touch her bare skin this time. He did, although it was a slow and cautious process, Harry slowly working his hand up over Hermione's underwear before slipping it down under the elastic. Hermione thought she was going to die at the sensation of Harry's slightly calloused fingers caressing the soft skin of her bottom, and she whimpered and tried to press against him even more.

It was now Harry's turn to think he was going to die as Hermione's wriggling was pushing him closer to what had the potential to be an embarrassing disaster. Harry continued kissing Hermione for as long as he dared but soon it was a little too much and he pulled free, gasping for air. "I think we should get ready to go to Sirius'."

Hermione was immediately all concern. "What's wrong?"

"I just think things are going a little too fast," Harry said, unwilling to say that he had almost lost control of his body.

Hermione could see how red-faced Harry was, and given the way he had been pushing against her, she guessed at exactly what was wrong. But not wanting to make him feel any more uncomfortable than he already obviously was, she simply agreed with his sentiment. "Perhaps you're right. I'll go get dressed and meet you downstairs." She then vanished, and Harry hurried into his bathroom to take a very, very cold shower.

Luna was waiting for Hermione in her bedroom and she grinned at her friend's flushed face and the white bra Hermione was holding in her hand. "I see that you and Harry got some studying done then."

Hermione blushed, making her face even redder. "You know very well that we weren't studying."

"It's a good job Remus and Aunt Cordie have gone ahead to help Sirius with the food for the party," Luna remarked, flopping onto the bed while Hermione began to undress.

Hermione was rather glad that the couple were out, Remus having already caught her and Harry in a somewhat compromising position a few days earlier, which had prompted the couple's decision to slow things down; a decision that had gone out of the window that afternoon after what was supposed to have been just a few kisses. "I know."

Luna became a little more serious. "So everything is okay with you and Harry? There are no George type problems?"

Hermione thought about how badly she had wanted Harry to touch her during their kissing session, and she vigorously shook her head. "None at all."

Upon hearing that, Luna began to probe a little deeper. "So have you done it yet?"

Hermione turned around from unzipping her skirt. "Luna, Harry's not old enough."

"You're really going to wait until he's sixteen?" Luna asked in surprise, aware that neither Justin nor Hannah had waited that long.

"Yes!" Hermione said firmly, believing it was the right thing to do, although she and Harry had yet to discuss this.

Luna thought Hermione was daft to wait. "I'd make love now if I could."

Hermione frowned, a little worried about Luna's continuing obsession with sex. "Luna, you've only kissed someone so far. You have no idea what it's even like to have someone touch your body, let alone know if you're ready to have sex." Hermione felt qualified to say this because, even though she herself was of age, she was not entirely certain if she was ready to go that far, no matter how much she liked Harry touching her.

Having no idea of what was going on in Hermione's mind, Luna gave a bigger sigh. "I know. But I just want to be with someone."

Hermione guessed Luna's desire was not truly related to having sex, but had more to do with wanting someone to share her affections with. "I know how badly you want a boyfriend, Luna. But boys aren't the answer to everything, and I'm afraid you're going to get really hurt if you jump into bed with a boy just to feel loved."

Luna gave a sniff, before looking up, her eyes shiny with tears. "I know I go on about sex all the time but I wouldn't do that. It's just that I feel a little bit left out; everyone has somebody except for me. I sometimes think I'm going to end up like those Muggle nuns Dudley told me about."

"Come here," Hermione said, and she drew Luna into a hug. "Luna, you're not going to end up a nun, and although I know you feel as though it's never going happen, the right person will eventually come along. But in the meantime if you ever need a hug, then come to me or Harry."

"But it's not quite the same as having a boyfriend," Luna complained as she snuggled closer to Hermione, lapping up the attention she was receiving, and proving Hermione's suspicions correct about wanting to be loved.

I know that," Hermione said. "But the offer still stands about the hug."

It was obvious that the comforting had helped when Luna teasingly asked, "So you're going to let me share Harry?"

Hermione shook her head in exasperation as she released the girl. "You know as well as I do that you don't want Harry."

Luna gave her biggest sigh so far. "I know but he's such a good kisser."

A little shiver ran down Hermione's spine as she thought about the kisses she and Harry had shared that afternoon. "He is, and I'm not sharing that part of him. Hugs only!"

Luna decided to move on. "Seeing as Harry is taken, do you think that Dudley might have improved since Christmas?"

"Do you really want to go down that road again?" Hermione asked.

Luna shook her head. "Not really, and, besides, like everyone else, he's going out with someone at the moment."

"Then perhaps you should focus on your schoolwork instead," Hermione suggested, hoping to channel Luna's energies into something more worthwhile than just chasing after boys.

Luna pulled a face. "I'd rather focus on finding a boyfriend."

Aware that she was not going to be able to talk Luna out of her quest, Hermione returned to the subject of Dudley. "Are you apparating Dudley to the party?"

Luna's face lit up, and she ignored Hermione's question to ask one of her own. "Do you think there might be someone there for me?"

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it. Most of Sirius' colleagues are probably going to be older than you."

The mention of older men made Luna think about someone she still had a sort of ongoing crush on. "Is Dae going?"

"I don't think Lucy would be impressed if you went after him," Hermione said, assuming that the pair were dating, even though no-one had actually come out and said as much.

Luna was a little taken aback. "I didn't think Lucy liked him."

"I thought she was dating him," Hermione said, before shaking her head. "It doesn't matter anyway. He's too old for you."

"But he is yummy, isn't he?" Luna asked, her face going all dreamy.

Hermione could not deny that Dae was exceptionally good looking but she was not particularly keen on the man. "Yes, he's yummy, but he's too much of a cold fish for me."

"Do you think he's cold in bed?" Luna asked, only half teasing.

"I don't know and I don't care," Hermione said, turning her back on Luna and dropping the last of her clothing onto the small pile she intended to deposit in the linen basket in her bathroom. It took her a moment before she realized that Luna was staring intently at her body. "Luna, what are you doing?"

"Seeing if you have any more handprints on you, like the ones on your bum," Luna announced without any shred of embarrassment.

Hermione grabbed her robe, covering up the evidence of where Harry's hand had been. "Luna!"

Luna's face became wistful, and she felt a little jealous of how close Hermione and Harry had obviously gotten. And even though she really had no desire to be with Harry, she still asked, "You're sure you don't want to share Harry for more than just hugs?"

"Perfectly," Hermione said in a slightly amused voice, and she pointed at the door. "Now go collect Dudley, and please tell Sirius that Harry and I got held up and that we'll be a little late."

"Can I have another hug first?" Luna asked, feeling a little down again now that she had seen the evidence of Harry and Hermione's close encounter.

Hermione hugged her again, totally aware of what had prompted the request. "One day you'll have the same, Luna. Just remember it's not a race. And please stop hankering after Dae; he's too old and you could do much better." Releasing Luna, Hermione added for good measure, "And he's most definitely no Hufflepuff."

"Don't forget that I've decided to look for someone who's not a Hufflepuff," Luna reminded Hermione. "But you're right about Dae being too old."

Hermione decided to relent a little at Luna's admission about Dae. "And perhaps you might be right about one of Sirius' colleagues; maybe one of them will be someone worthwhile meeting."

Luna felt much happier again. "Then I'd better be going." She kissed Hermione on the cheek. "I'll see you later."

Hermione sighed as she headed into her bathroom, hoping that she had managed to channel her inner Cordelia and give the right sort of advice to Luna.

Covent Garden

Sirius hugged Harry and Hermione when they arrived together to attend the party he was holding to celebrate his successful completion of his trial period at St. Bart's. "It's nice to see you both."

Hermione apologized for their tardiness. "Sorry we're a little late."

"You're not really that late, people are still arriving." Sirius glanced across the room to where Luna was talking to Dudley, her arms flapping up and down in what had to be an explanation about some sort of animal; the two of them usually ending up talking about their mutually favorite subject whenever they got together. "And Luna told me that you were trying to get to the bottom of something before you came out."

Both Harry and Hermione reddened, more so Hermione, who decided she was going to throttle Luna when she got her home, and she glanced over at the windows. "You must have a nice view from up here."

Sirius did not bother to hide his amusement at what the two had obviously been up to. "I do. It's what made me buy the place."

"I still can't believe that Gringotts allowed you to access your vault," Harry said, only having found out how Sirius had funded the purchase of the apartment that afternoon when Remus had happened to mention it.

"Bones thinks she has jurisdiction over the Goblins." Sirius smirked. "But the Goblins hate the Ministry yoke, and as I am head of the Black family household, they were hard pushed to refuse me." His smile got wider. "In fact they seemed to take great pleasure from allowing me access, which is a good job otherwise I'd never have been able to afford this place."

"As long as they don't report back to Amelia," Harry said worriedly.

"The Goblins would have known I was alive after the report about my execution in the Daily Prophet came out," Sirius informed him. "If they were going to divulge this information, they would have done it then."

"So why didn't they?" Harry asked.

When she had been dating George and had stayed at the Burrow, Hermione had talked in quite some detail to Bill Weasley about how Gringotts operated, and so she interrupted the conversation to pass on some of what she had learnt. "All of Gringotts' clients have airtight confidentiality agreements with the Goblins and their employees. If someone was to reveal something to an unauthorized

person about, say, a vault's content, then the employee, be he Goblin or wizard, would die."

Harry gasped. "But that's terrible."

"It's also why I was confident enough to approach Gringotts to gain access to my vault," Sirius informed Harry.

Harry relaxed a little on hearing this, and he moved onto a different subject. "So how are you finding living like a Muggle?"

"Strange," Sirius admitted. "It took me forever to work out how to use the answering machine on the telephone, and even now it sometimes goes wonky on me."

"Magic and electronics don't always mix," Hermione said in a know-it-all voice.

Sirius so far had only had trouble with the answering machine. "At least I've had no problems with the television. It's fun to watch it when I manage to get a break from work."

"How is work going?" Harry asked, as he had been wondering how Sirius was coping, especially as he hadn't seen him since New Year's Eve. And even though he had written to Sirius every few weeks, most of Sirius' responses had usually been two sentence notes along the lines of 'I'm fine. Hope you're doing well' sort of thing, work stealing away most of Sirius' spare time while he tried to establish himself.

"I wasn't entirely sure I could convince six junior doctors that I was a Muggle doctor who had been doing the job for years, but somehow I pulled it off," Sirius said, before making a confession. "Although to be truthful I have to admit that I'm sometimes hard pushed not to use magic to heal my patients."

Having wandered over when Sirius was talking about the television, Dudley commented on Sirius' confession. "So why don't you use it? It must be better than Muggle medicine."

"On the occasions when I cover the emergency room, I would be hard pushed to explain how a broken leg fixed itself, or why a patient didn't need stitches anymore, at least not without constantly

obliviating the patients I'm treating," Sirius explained. "And when I'm in surgery, I have other people in the operating theater with me, again making it difficult."

Luna, who had accompanied Dudley, gaped at Sirius. "You do surgery?"

This was the one aspect of the job that Sirius was not so keen on, and he had almost fainted the first time he had had to cut into a patient with a scalpel, but he refrained from mentioning this. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Did you use the accelerated learning spell to learn about surgical techniques?" Hermione asked, interested as to how useful the spell was in a real life application.

"Yes, but I," here Sirius grimaced, "stole some cadavers to practice on before I applied what I'd learnt on a real person."

Being a big fan of blood and gore movies, Dudley was rather interested in this part. "Where did you get them from, and why didn't anyone notice they'd been taken?"

"I took them from St. Andrews, a teaching school, where they have cadavers for student dissection, and I used magic to hide my tracks," Sirius admitted, and then, spotting that Luna had turned rather pale, he moved away from the subject. "But to be truthful what I like most is doing my rounds; I get to chat to my small charges, and it's really rather rewarding."

"So do you have a lot of paperwork?" On spotting Dudley's mouth opening again, Harry guessed that his cousin was about to return to the cadaver conversation. He had therefore asked the first question he could think of that would keep them off the more gruesome part of Sirius' job, Harry's arm going around Luna as he did so. Luna smiled gratefully at Harry, her legs feeling a little wobbly.

"Tons," Sirius answered, pulling a disgruntled face. "But it's part and parcel of the job." He wondered if Harry had a true interest in the job, or if, for Luna's sake, Harry had just been deflecting the conversation from the more unpleasant things he had to do. "If you're interested, you can come by and visit some time if you want."

Harry shook his head. "It's not really my thing, but thank you for offering."

Although she had little interest in medicine itself, Hermione was at heart curious about most subjects, and she immediately took Sirius up on his offer. "I'd like to have a look around."

"Then I'll collect you tomorrow morning at seven," Sirius offered. "You can come and do my rounds with me."

Hermione was rather delighted to hear this. "I'll be ready."

Hearing the sound of new arrivals, Sirius glanced over his shoulder. "They work with me, and so I should go and greet them. I'll see you all later."

"He's taking a chance mixing Muggles and wizards, isn't he?" Dudley asked as Sirius moved off.

"The only purebloods here apart from Sirius, are Lucy and Luna," Hermione reminded Dudley, not entirely sure whether or not to include Dae in the grouping. "And Luna has me and Harry to coach her. Everyone else has experience of the Muggle world and knows how to act."

"I don't need a coach," Luna protested indignantly. "I can pretend to do Muggle just as well as Sirius and Lucy can."

As she recalled the earlier flapping of arms, Hermione was not quite so sure. "Just don't mention anything unusual such as Snorkacks."

"Harry has already told me not to," Luna said, sounding rather resentful. "And I've decided that I don't really want to talk to a bunch of healers anyway." Luna's interest in any of Sirius' colleagues had quickly evaporated while Sirius had been talking about surgery and cadavers.

"They're doctors, not healers," Hermione corrected her friend. It was then that she noticed Harry staring intently out of the window. "Earth to Harry Potter."

Harry broke out of his daydream. "Sorry. I just thought I saw Anna Jameson."

"Who?" Dudley asked.

"A girl who used to be in Hufflepuff," Harry told him, aware that Dudley had never met her. "She gave me a pair of magical cufflinks that would protect me against most poisons."

"Cool!" Dudley exclaimed.

"They didn't work against Basilisk venom," Harry informed him, "so they're not that cool."

Hermione, who had moved to look out of the window, finished scanning outside just as Harry finished explaining. "I can't see anyone who looks like her."

"I only saw her for a few moments," Harry admitted. "And this is a Muggle area, so perhaps I was wrong."

"I hope so," Hermione said. "I'd hate for her to recognize Sirius."

"Even if she did, she'd think she was wrong. Everyone thinks he's dead," Harry reminded his girlfriend. "And I'm not exactly sure it was her."

"Let's hope it's not," Hermione said as she turned away from the window. She waved to Lucy, who had just arrived, coming directly from wizarding arrivals at Heathrow after spending a few days with her family in Boston. "Actually, I have something I want to ask Lucy."

Even though Harry guessed it had to be something to do with schoolwork, he still dutifully accompanied his girlfriend over to join Lucy.

Across the room Dae, who was talking to Remus, had also been hoping for an opportunity to speak to Lucy. He suspected that now Hermione had got in first, he would be hard pushed to get a little time alone with Lucy. Dae decided that if he was given no opportunity during the evening to talk to her, then he would bide his time and wait until she was ready to leave, aware that she would not be able to apparate directly out of the apartment with Muggle visitors there.

Later that evening

Lucy was furious when she realized that Dae was following her out to the alleyway she intended to apparate home from. "Dae, I'm not in the mood. It's been a long day, I'm tired, and I'm going home."

Dae prevented her from leaving by grabbing her wrist. "What you did tonight, it wasn't nice, Lucy."

"Then you shouldn't have grabbed my ass in front of Sirius' friends," Lucy hissed at him.

Dae had finally managed to corner Lucy in the middle of a conversation with two of the young doctors Sirius worked with, and when she had deliberately ignored him, Dae had decided to get her attention by sliding his hand down her back to cup her bottom. Furious at his actions, Lucy's response had been to grind her heel into Dae's foot.

Dae pushed her against the graffiti covered brick wall. "You're going to have to pay for what you did."

Lucy's eyes widened as she realized he intended to kiss her in the middle of the alleyway. "Don't you..."

Dae cut her off, his kiss not exactly rough, but he was also not taking no for answer. And once again passion exploded between the two of them, Lucy responding to Dae's kisses, until she felt his hand sliding up her dress. "We're outside, Dae."

"I know," Dae said, and he continued his exploration.

Lucy groaned as he found what he was seeking. "Oh Merlin."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about last time," Dae admitted, the pair having had several liaisons since the first time they had had sex at his home.

"I have," Lucy said, as Dae's fingers continued to work their magic, making her whimper.

"Liar!" Dae whispered, freeing himself from his trousers and lifting Lucy up onto him. "You want this as much as I do."

"I don't want you," Lucy managed to croak out as Dae maneuvered them so that he could lean against the wall for leverage.

"I don't believe you," Dae said, as Lucy wrapped her arms his neck.

The position they were in made it difficult to kiss, and so Dae used his mouth to suckle at the soft skin of Lucy's bare shoulder, with Lucy biting her lip to hold back her soft cries.

Nothing more was said as they both strove to find their release, Lucy finding it first. When it was over, she tugged down her dress, her face full of contempt. "It's over, Dae. Don't ever come near me again." Then she vanished.

When Lucy arrived back home, she ran into the last person she wanted to see. "Hi."

"I was starting to get a little worried," Remus said. He watched Lucy blush, his senses having already told him what had gone on, so he asked, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Lucy said shortly. "I'm going to bed."

Remus stopped her by gently taking her wrist. "If you need anyone to talk to, you know you can always come to me or Cordie."

Lucy had to admit that Remus and Cordie were probably now her closest friends. "Thanks, but this is one I have to deal with on my own."

Before she could go, Remus gently touched her collarbone with his free hand. "I understand. However, you might want to cover that up."

Lucy went very red as she remembered Dae sucking at her skin. "I will. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Lucy," Remus released her wrist and Lucy headed up the stairs.

Only then did Cordelia come out of the doorway, not having wanted to intrude on the conversation between her husband and Lucy. "What's going on?"

Remus had been aware that Cordelia had been close by. "She and Dae are having an affair."

Just like Hermione, Cordelia had suspected as much. "So what's the problem?"

"They detest each other," Remus informed her.

Cordelia was a little surprised to hear this. "You're sure?"

"Totally," Remus said, having been in a room with Lucy and Dae often enough to know this.

"Perhaps we should try and separate them then, maybe find someone to introduce Lucy to who might be a little more suitable," Cordelia suggested, hating the idea that maybe Lucy was being used by Dae, of whom Cordelia was not particularly that fond. "I obviously don't know anyone magical who might be suitable but you might."

Remus looked askance at his wife. "Me? I barely get time to deal with what's happening at Hogwarts and with our family, let alone have time to spare to go looking for a date for Lucy. And I get the feeling she wouldn't appreciate my interference, even if I did."

Cordelia had to admit he had a point. "I suppose. I just don't like the idea that she's not happy."

"Neither do I, but unless she wants to talk about, there's nothing we can do," Remus said as he wrapped an arm around Cordelia. "Let's go to bed." He then apparated them directly to their bedroom.

May 10th 1996

St. Bart's Hospital, London

Anna Jameson kissed her father goodbye, and headed towards the exit of the hospital, intending to find the nearest apparition point. Unfortunately she wasn't looking where she was going and ended up cannoning into a warm, white-coated body. "I'm so sorry."

"My fault entirely." Sirius immediately took the blame, even though it had not been his fault. He then started to walk away.

Anna frowned. The doctor looked awfully familiar, and she struggled to put a name to his face. Then it clicked. Without thinking, she called out, "Sirius Black?"

Sirius ignored his name and kept on walking.

Anna went to turn away, and then changed her mind. "Excuse me, sir." When Sirius kept on walking, Anna called out again. "Excuse me, doctor."

Guessing that the young brunette would likely come running after him if he failed to respond, Sirius stopped, and turning around, he acknowledged Anna. "Yes, miss?"

"It's actually Anna Jameson." Anna waited for any signs of recognition of her name.

Sirius, of course, recognized it immediately, and he didn't bother to hide the fact. "You're the daughter of our newest investor in the private wing of the hospital, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged. And you are," here she looked at Sirius' name tag as she strode up to him, "Doctor White."

Sirius realized that Anna probably suspected that she had been right about his real identity, even though she must have known it was impossible. And so Sirius kept his cool, holding out his hand. "It's Simon White."

"So you're a doctor then?" Too late, Anna realized how stupid she sounded.

Sirius grinned at her. "That's what the tag says."

"Sorry, I just thought..." Anna shook her head, starting to doubt her ridiculous suspicion.

"You thought what?" Sirius prompted her.

"I thought you were someone else," Anna admitted. "But that's impossible as the person I thought you were is dead."

"The Sirius Black you called out for?" Sirius asked, unable to resist asking.

"Yes." Anna nodded, deciding that she must be insane to think that this man could be Sirius Black. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm sorry to have bothered you, Dr. White. I'd better let you get on with your work."

Even though he knew he was playing with fire, Sirius discovered that he didn't want the young woman to leave. "I was actually about to do my rounds. Would you care to join me?"

"Is that allowed?" Anna asked in surprise.

"For someone as pretty as you it is." Sirius wanted to roll his eyes at the corniness of his own remark, and he flashed an apologetic smile at her. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

"I now don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not," Anna remarked tartly.

"It was meant as a compliment." Sirius nodded towards the doors. "So, would you like to accompany me on my rounds, Miss Jameson? I usually do them in the morning, but I had to attend the presentation your father gave, so I've had to delay them."

"I think it would be a good idea to see where some of Dad's money is going to be invested, so yes, I would like that," Anna said, as she fell into step with Sirius. "How long have you worked here?"

"Ever since I qualified as a consultant." Sirius pushed open the doors, and stood aside for Anna to enter. "Before I joined St. Bart's last year, I worked at Mitchells for more than eight years. Do you know it?"

Anna shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"Nice hospital but St. Bart's is better," Sirius enthused, having looked around Mitchells with Dae so that he could get his cover

sorted out, with both men using a few illegal magic spells in order to do it. "Well, let's pick up my boys and girls."

"Boys and girls?" Anna asked, a little confused by the remark.

Sirius told her. "My team who usually does the rounds with me."

Anna was suddenly hit by nerves, although she shouldn't have been, her job sometimes involving dealing with large crowds. "Perhaps I should go. I'm more than likely going to get in the way."

"Nonsense," Sirius said, not wanting her to go.

Curiosity and commonsense warred, with curiosity winning out. "I'll just stand at the back then."

"Well, I didn't expect you to examine anyone," Sirius told her as he pushed open a door.

Even though there were only six doctors in the room, Anna's nerves returned. About to flee, she was stopped by Sirius placing a hand at the small of her back and introducing her. "Hi kids, this is Anna Jameson. You all know who her father is, so play nice."

"You mean she's not your girlfriend, Sir?" one of the men asked.

"No, Roger, she's not." Sirius was used to gentle ribbing from the team he had been working with since November, but he was also aware that they all knew how far they could take it with him. "And no, she's not available either." He turned to Anna and cheekily asked, "Are you?"

Anna immediately became flustered, "Um, I, um..."

"If you're free, would you like to go out for a drink tonight?" the man Sirius had called Roger piped up.

"I'm not," Anna blurted out, aware of all eyes being on her. "I have a boyfriend."

"If you change your mind..." Roger winked at her.

"That's enough." Sirius' voice held no censure as he warned his subordinate. "Miss Jameson is accompanying us on our rounds to make sure her father's money is going to be well spent, and not to be harassed into going out on a date with you."

"You can't blame a man for trying, Sir." Roger winked yet again at Anna, and got to his feet to join his comrades.

As they made the rounds, Anna watched the children that Sirius was dealing with all react well to both him and his team. Her heart almost stopped though when they reached the bed of a small black girl, who smiled at Sirius as though the sun rose and set with him. But it wasn't the girl's adoring look that had the heart stopping effect, it was her demand of, "Doctor Simon, show me some magic!"

Sirius immediately reached around the girl's ear and pulled out a coin, before palming it. "Where is it?"

"In my mouth!" the girl yelled out in delight.

Sirius turned to Anna and reached behind her ear. "Almost right."

The little girl beamed happily. "Show me another."

Sirius pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, and stuffed it into his closed fist. "Blow on it."

The little girl excitedly blew on Sirius' fist, and he then opened it, making her squeal with delight when it had gone.

"Where is it?" The girl asked the same question Sirius had earlier.

"Miss Jameson, reach inside your left pocket," Sirius instructed.

Anna dipped her hand into her jacket pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief. "How did you do that?"

"It's magic," the little girl informed Anna in a knowing voice, before pleading with Sirius. "Show me another one, please."

"I'm afraid I have to go but I'll see you tomorrow, Katya." Sirius tussled her hair. "Keep practicing."

"I will, Doctor Simon," Katya promised.

Once the round was over, Anna questioned Sirius' abilities. "So how did you do that trick with the little girl and the handkerchief?"

"You don't believe in magic, Miss Jameson?" Sirius couldn't resist asking.

"I might," Anna hedged. "So tell me, how did you do it?"

"I slipped the handkerchief into your pocket while I was pretending to collect the coin from behind your ear." Sirius pulled out several handkerchiefs from his pocket. "I keep a large supply for entertaining the children."

"They all seem to love you," Anna remarked, feeling relieved that it had not been real magic, and that this Simon White could not be Sirius Black after all, even though she knew she was being stupid even considering it.

"I enjoy my job, and taking care of them," Sirius said as he shed his coat. "I'm off duty now. Can I offer to buy you dinner, or would I be treading on someone's toes?"

Anna blushed. "I'm afraid I can't tonight, although I don't really have a boyfriend. I had the feeling that Roger might be persistent if I said otherwise."

"You summed him up well." Sirius picked up his leather jacket and held out his hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Jameson, and perhaps we could have dinner some other night."

Anna was rather sorry that the evening had to end, but she had things waiting for her to finish in her recently acquired home. "I don't know when I'll be free next."

Sirius took this as a polite no. "In that case, let's just leave things at it was a pleasure. Goodnight, Miss Jameson."

"Um, goodnight." Anna said in a flustered voice, not quite sure how to respond, her natural reserve stopping her from telling Sirius that she was in fact interested in going to dinner with him at some point. And she had little chance to say anything else anyway, as Sirius had

turned and headed away from her, his pace decidedly brisk. Not knowing what else to do, Anna headed off towards the original apparition point she had intended to leave from when she had first careened into Sirius.

After wishing Anna goodbye, Sirius' hasty egress had been halted by a colleague who had wanted to talk about a case, delaying Sirius by almost half an hour. Although he could have saved time and apparated home, Sirius continued on his original course and headed down to the staff parking area of the hospital, where he climbed onto his motorbike. A short time later he arrived home and parked in the basement, greeting one of his fellow tenants who had also just arrived back.

Having already been delayed once, Sirius was a little irritated when the elevator stopped on the ground floor. His irritation, however, turned to pleasure when the doors parted to reveal a familiar face. "Hello again."

After leaving Sirius, Anna had apparated to a nearby supermarket, picked up a few items for her dinner, and walked back to her apartment block, enjoying the summer evening. When she pressed the button for the elevator, she was more than a little startled when the doors slid open to reveal the man she had left behind at the hospital, and instead of responding to his greeting, she demanded to know, "What are you doing here?"

Sirius recognized her apprehension almost immediately. "I live here. You?"

"The same." Anna still didn't step inside the elevator though, although she did nod politely at the other occupant. "Go on up. I almost forgot that I need to check my post."

Sirius could tell that he had unnerved her, and deciding to prove that he did indeed occupy the apartment block, he stepped out of the elevator and joined Anna as she walked to the mailboxes. "I should do the same." When she slid a key into a lock to open up a box, he remarked, "So you're the tenant below me."

Anna could hardly believe it. "You have the penthouse apartment?"

Even though he had checked his mailbox that morning, Sirius opened up his mailbox again to find, as expected, nothing in there. "I bought it when I was halfway through my trial period at St. Bart's." He then recalled an anonymous offer he had received for his apartment ten weeks earlier. "So tell me, was it your father who made the obscene offer for my apartment a few months ago?"

Relaxing a little now that Sirius had proven that he was indeed a tenant, Anna nodded. "Yes. One of my friends used to live here, and I loved the area, so Dad tried to get the penthouse apartment for me." She was curious. "Most people would have jumped at the chance of that much money. Why didn't you?"

Sirius headed back towards the elevator. "I don't need it."

Anna realized that Sirius must be very well off to turn down over half a million pounds in profit. "So if you don't need to work, why do you?"

"Probably for the same reasons you work as a liaison officer." Sirius let her know that he was well aware of what she did for a living as they stepped into the elevator together.

"Being Dad's liaison officer isn't exactly working for a living." Anna pressed the button for her floor.

"Do you work with your sister?" Sirius also let her know that he knew she had an older sister.

"Jo's a..." Anna caught herself just in time; she had almost said a freelance curse breaker. "Well, I don't really know what she'd call herself. Probably a wanderer."

"Do you like to travel?" Sirius pressed the 'open' button on the elevator doors to stop them from closing when they reached Anna's floor a few moments later.

Anna shook her head. "I'm more of a homebody really."

"And yet you moved out of your parents' home," Sirius observed.

"It was getting a little stifling with Mum and Dad trying to set me up with eligible bachelors almost every other day." Anna rolled her eyes.

"They know that Jo is never going to settle down, and even though I'm not quite twenty-one yet, they've made it more than clear that they want to see me married, and sooner rather than later."

Also being a pureblood, Sirius knew how that felt. "You don't seem too enthused about the idea."

"I'm not averse to the idea of marriage." Even as she responded, Anna wondered why she was even discussing this with a virtual stranger, especially one whom she had first suspected of being Sirius Black and then a stalker when he had turned up in the elevator. "But if and when I do, I prefer to pick my own partner."

"I don't blame you." Sirius shifted his motorcycle helmet as the elevator began to ping at him. "Well, I'd better free up the elevator before people think it's broken. Goodnight again."

"Goodnight." Anna stayed where she was until the elevator door closed, and then she let herself into her apartment. What she hadn't told Sirius was that despite his refusal, both tenants on the floor below him had been willing to sell up, and her father had had the two apartments knocked into one, resulting in a light and airy apartment that was now almost as large as Sirius' own.

After setting up a silencing spell so that she wouldn't disturb her neighbors, above and below her, Anna put on some classical music, and began to make dinner. She knew she could have used magic, but making a sandwich was really quite simple.

June 28th 2006

With the Beauxbatons Champion down for the count, Harry cheered just as loudly as everyone else when it was George who emerged victoriously from the maze holding the Triwizard Cup in his hand, with a disappointed Natasha coming out a few moments after him. Harry grinned at Hermione. "So do you still want me now that George can say he's the Triwizard Champion?"

Hermione pretended to think about it. "Well, he has won quite a lot of a money, and as I remember you once pointing out, he is good looking and popular."

Harry laughed as he watched Angelina Johnson burst out onto the field below them and hurl herself into George's arms. "That's very true, but you might have to do something about his girlfriend first."

"Then it looks as though I'll just have to settle for you," Hermione said, slipping her hand in Harry's, and kissing his cheek.

Their attention was drawn back to George as the crowd began to yell 'speech, speech, speech'. And at the urging of the Headmaster, George made his way onto the makeshift stand that held the Ministry dignitaries, George's family, and most of the Hogwarts teachers. Putting his arm around Angelina, George tapped his throat and moments later his voice boomed out, "Am I brilliant or what?"

Laughter echoed around the stands. When it died down, George continued. "But seriously. I want to thank everyone for their support, particularly my family, my beautiful girlfriend," here George broke off to thoroughly kiss Angelina before he continued, "and, for agreeing to take part in the second task even when she knew she was going to suffer for it, I would like to say my biggest thank you to Hermione Granger. Hermione, you're my heroine. I really couldn't have done this without you."

The rest of George's speech was a blur to Hermione as she was sought out and patted on the back by the very same Gryffindors who had shunned her when she had broken up with George. And the result of all the unexpected attention was an overemotional Hermione, who Harry ended up comforting under the stands, while everyone else headed back to Hogwarts to celebrate. "It looks as though I'm going to have more competition than just George after you."

Hermione gave a wet giggle. "I think George is more than happy with Angelina." George had been dating the pretty black girl for almost two months, and had already told Hermione how happy she made him.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I still find it weird that he's going out with her; I mean she was Fred's girlfriend first."

"And Fred finished with her to go out with Natasha," Hermione pointed out, wiping away some of the moisture that was still threatening to fall. "George said that he and Angelina have always

gotten along really well, and both of them are interested in the same sort of things."

Charlie had told Harry that George would be joining him at the Reserve when he completed his schooling, and so Harry brought this up. "Then I hope her interest extends to dragons, seeing as George will be spending most of his time after he leaves Hogwarts working as a trainee dragon keeper."

"He'll get some spare time," Hermione said.

Harry pulled a face. "I spent a week there, and although Charlie took one day off to take us all out sightseeing, even he said that he gets little spare time. Don't forget when Lucy went out to see him, she said that she got to spend little time with Charlie, and that he was more interested in the dragons than in a relationship."

Hermione like Harry had no real idea that there had been more to the failure of Lucy and Charlie's brief relationship than what they had been told. "Then perhaps he and Angelina might not work out after all, but I hope they do. I think she's good for George."

"So do I," Harry said, a bit of a grin crossing his face. "It means that he won't be coming after my girl."

Hermione was pleased to see that just like their earlier discussion, Harry was still joking. "He couldn't have me if he wanted me, not that he does. You saw how he was with Angelina when he gave his speech."

Harry became serious at the mention of the speech. "I know that George's speech was a bit of a shocker for you. Are you feeling better now?"

Hermione nodded as she tucked her damp tissue into her pocket. "I just never expected George to do something like that. It should have been George's moment to shine, and he was willing to share a little bit of the limelight with me."

"You deserved it," Harry said truthfully. "If you hadn't taken part, then George would have been last to start into the maze instead of first, and he probably would have lost to Natasha."

Hermione still wondered though if she had made the right decision. "I still think that maybe I should have said no."

Harry disagreed. "I'm glad you said yes, even though you had to put up with so much shit from me. If I hadn't blown my top that day, I'm not sure that I would have convinced myself that it's okay to be going out with you."

Hermione changed her mind. "Then I'm glad I said yes, although I still regret what happened with Debbie; she still hasn't forgiven me, and I have the feeling she never will, especially with what George just said, and all the attention I received from everyone because of it."

Harry knew he would be far from bothered about the lack of attention from Debbie's quarter if he was Hermione. "That's no great loss; at least Nic is on your side."

"Which pisses Debbie off even more," Hermione said, wincing as she remembered how unkind her female cousin had been during the few days she had spent at her mother's at the end of the Easter holidays. At Hogwarts, Debbie just ignored her entirely. "I'm just glad that Mummy is coming over here during the summer holidays."

Harry knew that Virginia had been far from happy at Debbie's attitude, and even though she was not keen on England, she had agreed to visit Hermione so that her daughter would not be subjected to her cousin's virulence. "Have you decided whether to tell her about Sirius yet?"

"Sirius has said he doesn't mind, but I don't know if it's such a good idea," Hermione said. "I think we should just have him use his alias around Mummy."

"You don't want her to have a meltdown again, do you?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "It was bad enough telling her I was going out with you."

Harry was aware that Virginia had been rather unsettled by the news, and although she was better behaved towards Harry now, she still

was far from happy that Harry was dating Hermione. "Then we'll play it safe."

Unfortunately, a few hours after Harry and Hermione had been discussing him, Sirius was about to do exactly the opposite.

Covent Garden

Anna ran into Sirius again as they both left their apartment building together. "Dr. White, I was beginning to think you'd moved out."

Sirius shook his head. "Not a chance. Although I have to admit that I was beginning to think the same about you."

"I've been around," Anna said, and then she went to head off. "By the way, it was nice to see you again. I'd like to stay and chat but I'm running late."

"It was nice to see you too, Miss Jameson," Sirius responded in as formal a manner as Anna had used. He then turned the same way as Anna was going. "I'm not following you, at least not this time."

Anna recalled their first meeting. "I made it a little obvious that you startled me when the elevator opened, didn't I?"

"A little, but it was understandable given the circumstances," Sirius said, before adding teasingly, "But just to make sure I don't startle you again, I'll confirm once more that I most definitely am not following you."

Anna found herself wishing that he were, especially since she was far from looking forward to what she had planned that evening. "If you were, you could save me from what I've got on tonight."

Sirius hazarded a guess based on what she was wearing. "You have a meeting?"

Anna looked down at her severe black dress and jacket as they walked. "Actually, I don't. Dad's arranged for another dinner for me to meet someone."

Sirius decided that as much as he was most definitely playing with fire, he could tell from the way she was dressed that Anna really

didn't want to go. And from her comment about saving her, Sirius believed that she might be a little more receptive towards him this time, and so he therefore offered her an alternative. "If you'd care to play hooky, I'd be happy to take you to dinner. I was just on my way out for that reason."

Anna thought about the stuffed shirt pureblood she knew her parents would have invited, and she gave Sirius a conspiratorial smile. "Give me five minutes." She then turned around and headed back into their building.

When she returned, she was wearing a much simpler blue cotton dress and a denim jacket. "Dad wasn't pleased but I said that I wanted to talk to you about St. Bart's and so he relented."

Sirius held out his arm. "So we'll talk a little about St. Bart's to keep up the pretence. I like the hospital. Do you?" When Anna nodded, Sirius went on. "There, we've talked about it. Now tell me, Miss Jameson, do you like Italian?"

"I do," Anna confirmed, and they started to head for the Barbican Underground. "You don't drive?"

"I sort of do," Sirius said. "But you're not exactly dressed for a motorbike."

"A motorbike?" Anna squeaked. "You ride a motorbike?"

Sirius gave her a gentle reminder. "I thought you would have noticed the helmet the last time we met."

Anna went red. "Of course. You had a black helmet under your arm." Then she recalled a motorbike she had seen in the basement. "Is your bike that big red one I've seen downstairs?"

Sirius shook his head. "It's black."

Anna could not recall a bike that matched that description. "I haven't seen it then. So what kind of motorbike is it?"

"Would you know if I told you what model it was?" Sirius asked as he began to descend the steps into the Underground station.

"No, but I could find out," Anna responded. "Or you could show me."

"Is that an invitation to go out again?" Sirius teased.

"No!" Anna blushed. "I don't know why I said it."

"I'm quite happy to show you the bike if you want to see it, no strings attached." Sirius headed for the ticket machine. He suspected that Anna would not have any Muggle money on her, and he slipped in the correct change for two tickets. "This way."

Even though she was au fait with the Muggle world, Anna had never ridden the Underground before, and so it was all rather bewildering for her. But Sirius seemed to know exactly what to do, and any final doubts about her ridiculous notion that Sirius could be a convicted magical felon, who had already been executed, dwindled and died.

As dinner came to an end, Sirius put down his glass of cognac, and even though Anna was quite a bit younger than him, he had discovered that she was extremely mature for her age, as well as intelligent, and that she had a good sense of humor. And so, as he was rather taken with her, Sirius brought up the subject of his motorbike again as an opening for another date. "So, Annabelle, when would you like to see my bike?"

Anna had had an exceptionally nice time with Sirius, and she was more than a little smitten by him. She therefore decided that she would like to see him again, despite his constantly calling her by her full, and much hated, first name. "As I've already said, Simon, I prefer Anna, and..."

Sirius interrupted her. "I think Annabelle suits you."

Anna pulled a face. "I hate the name."

Sirius relented. "Then Anna it is."

Anna smiled. "Thank you, and in answer to your question about the bike, I'd like to see it this weekend, if you're free."

"I'm on duty then, and for the first half of next week, I'm afraid," Sirius said reluctantly. "But I'm free on Thursday."

Anna's brow wrinkled. "I'm flying out to New York that day, and I'll be gone for at least a month."

"How about I head to New York and take you out to dinner?" Sirius offered.

Anna was rather shocked. "Don't you think that the other side of the Atlantic is a long way to go to take someone out to dinner, especially as you barely know me."

"It is a long way," Sirius admitted, but he had every intention of portkeying if he went, and he guessed that even though she had said she was flying, Anna was also going to be using the same method of transport he was intending to use. "But I haven't had a decent break in a long time, and I've never been to New York, so it would be a dual purpose visit: a holiday and the chance to go out to dinner with you again."

"I don't have meetings every day so if you're thinking about doing some sightseeing, I could show you around," Anna offered, although she knew she would have to brush up on what Muggles did in New York if Sirius said yes, Anna now firmly convinced that Sirius was nothing more than a successful Muggle doctor.

"Then I'll let you know what dates are good for me," Sirius said, holding out his arm as Anna rose from the table and they headed towards the door.

As the pair walked back to the apartment block they lived in, they chatted amicably about some of the places Anna had visited. Once they reached Anna's floor, Sirius politely stepped out of the elevator and walked her to her door.

Anna's stomach began to flutter nervously, expecting him to kiss her. "Goodnight then." She was therefore rather surprised when Sirius made no move to do so, instead repeating her sentiment, and then standing to one side as she opened the door.

Assured she was safely inside, Sirius then turned away and headed for the stairwell.

Once inside her apartment, Anna leant against the door after closing it. She had wanted Sirius to kiss her, but she was rather delighted

that he had been an absolute gentleman and had simply made sure she was safely home; this was more than she could say for some of the stuffed shirts her father had set her up with. After throwing her handbag onto the side table, and passing a mirror, Anna gave her a reflection a joyful smile before heading towards her bedroom. Launching herself onto the bed, she gave a rather rambunctious whoop of delight, which carried to the floor above her.

Upstairs, Sirius grinned at the faint sound of a happy yell, hoping it had something to do with him. Heading into his study, he opened his planner and checked through his schedule for the coming month. After penciling in a four day break in a fortnight's time, Sirius closed the planner, and said a small prayer. "Please, Merlin, don't let anything mess this up."

Unfortunately for Sirius, Merlin obviously was not listening as Sirius' trip was about to be delayed by events beyond his control.

Two weeks later

Cordelia checked that she had everything. "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Hermione rolled her eyes; Cordelia had been fussing ever since she had discovered that the conference Remus was attending would involve an overnight stay, mostly because this was the first time the children had ever truly been allowed to stay in the house on their own. "Yes. Sirius has said we can contact him if we have a problem."

"But he's going to New York tomorrow night, and we might not be back before he leaves," Cordie protested.

"I don't think anything is going to happen in the space of a couple of hours between him leaving and you getting back," Hermione said. "If it does, we can always contact Dae at a push."

Cordelia wrinkled her nose, her feelings towards Dae not having improved any since she had learnt about him and Lucy. "I suppose."

Remus could feel Hermione's irritation, and he checked the time. "Cordie, it's time to go. Take my hand."

"But..." Cordie's words were lost to the children as Remus grabbed her hand and the couple vanished.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. "I thought Aunt Cordie was going to change her mind."

"I don't think she wanted to leave us alone while they're that far away," Luna remarked. "But I think it's going to be fun."

Remus had a conference to attend in Venice in Albus' stead about a change in curriculum in magical schools, and Cordelia had gone with him. Lucy had left the country to visit her parents as she usually did at some point during the school holidays, and this meant that Harry and his friends were going to be alone for two days, and all of them were rather looking forward to it. However, unbeknownst to them, their sojourn was going to be brief.

Hermione picked up her coat. "Sirius has said I can drop by the hospital again."

It was Harry's turn to roll his eyes, especially as he had been hoping for a little time alone with Hermione. "I thought you didn't like healing."

"This isn't healing," Hermione argued. "Sirius' secretary is going to show me how the computer database works." She leant over and brushed a kiss over Harry's lips. "But I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Harry was disappointed that Hermione had gone, and he turned to Luna, who had said something to him. "I'm sorry. I missed that."

"I said, you could play cards with me if you want something to do," Luna repeated her offer.

Deciding that it would help to pass the time, Harry agreed, and the two of them sat down at the card table. Time flew by, and Harry was about to suggest apparating out to join Hermione, and then going out for some dinner, when there was a bright flash of fire and Fawkes appeared. However, he was far from alone, and his burden was one that was not pleasant to see, for the man he had borne to Potter Place was covered in the same sticky brown tarlike substance that Harry had seen in Hermione's memory of the soul fragment

emanating from his scar. After making his surprise delivery, Fawkes vanished.

As the two children neared him, Albus half opened his eyes, but they seemed unfocussed, and it was obvious to them that he did not recognize either of them as he pleaded, "Severus, kill me."

Then Albus' eyes closed once more and despite Harry trying to get him to respond to him, nothing worked. After trying in vain for a few minutes, Harry decided that they had a major problem, and it wasn't one that they could deal with without help. He turned to Luna. "Get Justin, and then stay with the Professor. But whatever you do, don't touch him."

"Where are you going?" Luna asked, about to apparate upstairs.

"To fetch Dae," Harry said, and with that, both children vanished.

Next Chapter: Harry and his friends fight to save Albus' life.

Thanks to Aealket for his inspiration for the Hermione/Luna scene.

Chapter 58: A Sticky Problem

As Luna appeared in his bedroom, an indignant Justin threw the sheet over his nude fiancée. "Luna, what the hell are you playing at?"

Luna was far from caring that Justin and Hannah were naked. "Professor Dumbledore is being attacked by a Horcrux! He's in the sitting room. Harry's gone to get Dae but I need you to come downstairs with me and help me watch over the Professor."

"Give us two minutes," Justin said, his indignation vanishing in the face of the emergency.

Luna vanished and reappeared downstairs. Almost tentatively she approached Albus and began trying to get a reaction out of him, just as Harry had earlier. Again though, there was no response, except for a tortured groan. By the time someone showed up, Luna was very afraid, frustrated, and in tears. "I can't make him wake up, Harry."

Harry could tell from Luna's face that she was barely holding back her tears and he held out his arms. "Come here."

Luna needed no encouragement and she flew across the room and into Harry's waiting arms. "I'm sorry. I tried but I couldn't do anything, and Justin said he would be down and he's not."

"It's okay, Luna," Harry soothed her. Then he looked over her head at Dae. "Am I right about this being a soul fragment?"

"I'm afraid so," Dae said, before staring at the prone figure on the floor. "What the hell was Albus playing at? He knew better than to try to disarm a Horcrux alone."

"Perhaps he set it off accidentally," Harry suggested.

Luna made a suggestion from the safety of Harry's arms. "Or maybe someone laid a trap for him."

"You said he begged Snape to kill him?" Dae asked.

Harry nodded. "Do you think Snape did this?"

"I don't know," Dae said, although he had a sneaking suspicion that Severus had had something to do with it. "We need..."

He was interrupted by Justin and Hannah joining them, Justin apologizing. "Sorry. It took us longer to get dressed than I thought it would. We've told Dudley but he's in the shower and he said he'll be down shortly."

Hannah was hit with a wave of nausea as Albus groaned as if in pain, and she turned fearful eyes towards the only adult in the room. "Is he... is he going to die?"

"If we can't get the Horcrux off him, then yes," Dae said bluntly, examining Albus more closely but taking care not to get too close. "He's wearing Slytherin's ring. That has to be the Horcrux."

At Dae's words, Luna moved out of the circle of Harry's arms and withdrew her wand to summon the ring, only for Harry to knock it out of her hand. "You can't do that, Luna. It might attack you."

"But we have to try and do something," Luna protested tearfully. "We can't just leave him like that."

Dae agreed. "We know, and we're going to try and help him. But Harry's right, Luna, it might attack you if you try and summon the ring, although I doubt that summoning it would work anyway. Somehow it's fused to his hand."

At Dae's words, Justin looked a little closer at Albus' hand. "Is that how a Horcrux works?"

Dae shook his head. "From what I've read, I don't think so, but to be truthful, I don't really know."

"Could we cut his hand off?" Justin asked, making a pale Hannah shudder.

"I'm not sure that would work either," Dae said. "The Horcrux has not only fused to his hand but the soul fragment has spread and appears to be feeding off him. Those almost look like suckers or tentacles on his neck and face."

"Then how do we save him?" Hannah asked, her own voice as tremulous as Luna's had been.

"Save who?" Dudley asked, hurrying into the room, his hair still wet from his shower. Then he noticed Albus lying on the floor, and having seen Harry's soul fragment at close quarters, Dudley knew only too well what was wrong. "When you said there was an emergency downstairs, I thought you meant like something had broken."

Harry wished it was that simple. "Fawkes delivered him and then vanished. We're trying to figure out how to save him."

Dae laid out the only option he could see. "I think the only chance we'll have is once the soul fragment has more or less manifested and withdrawn from the ring, and that's as long as we can separate the ring from Albus' hand. If that's possible, then we can try and destroy the ring."

"What ring?" Dudley asked, having missed Dae identify it. "And how are you going to destroy it?"

"Slytherin's ring – I think it's the Horcrux that housed the soul fragment. And as for destroying it, I'm not sure how we're going to do it yet. I think that Fiendfyre is out of the question this time. I barely held it together the last time I used it," Dae said, not willing to take the same risk that he had with Ravenclaw's Diadem.

Luna's muffled voice came from Harry's chest, having returned to the comfort of his arms while Dae had been talking about the destruction of the ring. "If that's too dangerous, then what else can we use?"

"What about that sword that Gryffindor bloke had?" Dudley suggested, remembering Remus' history lessons about Slytherin and Gryffindor becoming enemies. "If that's Slytherin's ring, then perhaps the Sword can destroy it."

"There's only one problem," Harry said. "Professor Dumbledore said that only a Gryffindor can use the Sword and none of us are Gryffindors."

"Remus was a Gryffindor," Dae told him, although he was sure Harry would have known this. "And he'd be useful if we can locate Snape to question him."

Harry would normally have agreed with Dae about Remus being the best person for the job, but not this time. "We'd have to get an international portkey and then try to locate him at the conference center or hotel, and I'm not sure how long that would take, especially if he's gone out to dinner or something like that."

With Remus out of the picture, Dudley thought of someone else they could trust who had also been in Gryffindor. "What about Sirius? Wasn't he a Gryffindor as well?"

"I'll get him," Harry said, and after releasing Luna, he vanished, only to reappear five minutes later with Hermione and no Sirius.

An obviously frightened and upset Luna demanded to know, "Where's Sirius?"

Hermione immediately moved to put her arm around the white-faced girl. "He's in emergency surgery, and we can hardly pull him out of it, not even for the Headmaster."

"But we need a Gryffindor," Dudley protested, not realizing that Harry had already relayed the information to Hermione before returning with her. "We're going to get the Sword of Gryffindor, and to beat up Snape." Dudley's admiration of the potions master had faded over time after seeing firsthand how badly Severus treated Harry and a good number of the other students.

"Beat up Snape?" Hermione echoed, as this was something that Harry had not mentioned.

Harry quickly told her about Albus' words. "... and so we think he has something to do with this."

Although Hermione did not like Severus any more than anyone else, she came up with another alternative. "Perhaps Professor Snape was trying to help Professor Dumbledore. It sounds more likely than Professor Snape trying to entrap him, and then Professor Dumbledore begging for help."

Dae, who had been willing to condemn Severus as quickly as Harry had been, had to agree that Hermione had a point. "Okay, but I still think it's worthwhile trying to find him. He might know something we don't."

"Then we need to find a Gryffindor who can help us, and then head to Hogwarts as soon as we can," Hermione declared, her natural bossiness coming to the forefront. "Any suggestions?"

"What about George?" Harry offered up, particularly as things were now much better between him and the Gryffindor. "When I stayed with Charlie last week, he said that George wasn't joining him until Saturday, and even though I've had my ups and downs with George, I'd trust him, and I'm sure he'd help."

Justin was not so certain. "But he's not exactly part of our circle. What about Ron?"

Hermione disagreed with Justin. "I don't think he has what it takes." Hermione gave a shiver as she looked down at the mass of sticky goo that now covered a good part of the Headmaster's body. "Whoever wields the Sword will have to have a strong stomach, and I know that Ron most definitely doesn't."

"And this George does?" Dae asked.

Both Harry and Hermione nodded, Harry taking point. "Charlie said that even when George saw someone almost sliced in half by a dragon's tail when he spent last summer with him, he didn't flinch, and like everyone else, he tried to help."

Dudley had not heard about this before. "Someone died?"

Harry nodded. "Dragon keeping is dangerous work, and Charlie said that to do well at the job it requires someone who is brave and willing to take chances, and I think George is both of those."

"Then George is our man," Dae declared, not willing to let the conversation go on, the soul fragment now having covered three quarters of Albus' body. "Go fetch him."

Harry held out his arms. "I'll take Luna, Hermione. I think you should go."

Hermione handed over her charge. "I'll be as quick as I can."

However, when Hermione returned, it was not with whom they expected. Hermione quickly explained. "Bill was the only one who was in. Apparently the whole family decided to go out to Romania a few days early to settle George in and to visit Charlie."

"And you were lucky to find me in. I was supposed to have gone as well but I have a contract to fulfill in the morning," Bill said, as he hurried over to where Albus was lying. He paled as he examined him. "Is that what I think it is?"

Dae did not reveal exactly what it was. "And what do you think it is?"

Bill swung around. "If I'm right, it's a soul splinter from a Horcrux."

Harry, like everyone else, was shocked. "You know about them?"

"Yes," Bill said, returning his attention back to Albus. "At least in theory I do. As a curse-breaker it's something I need to know how to deal with. You'd be surprised at what's hidden in some of the older vaults and tombs into which I'm required to gain access."

Luna was thrown by Bill's comment. "I thought you were just a ward-breaker, Bill."

"Breaking wards is just part of my job," Bill said, as he turned away from Albus.

"So do you know of a way to destroy a Horcrux that doesn't involve Fiendfyre?" Dae asked, having run out of ideas himself.

"Goblin magic, basilisk venom, and the Heart of Damarra." Bill listed everything of which he was aware.

Hermione, of course, had heard of all of them. "I thought the Heart disappeared centuries ago, and has never been found."

"You're correct, which is why we can't use it," Bill acknowledged Hermione's statement. "We can't use Goblin magic either, as I know only too well that they won't help."

"Not even for Albus?" Dae asked in surprise.

"Not for any wizard," Bill informed him, "unless he or she is an employee."

"But you're an employee," Luna pointed out. "Won't they help you if you ask?"

"The Goblins would help if it was me in the Professor's position but they won't help him," Bill clarified what he had meant.

"But you said they wouldn't help any wizard," Dudley said, getting confused.

"They have to help me; it's part of my contract," Bill revealed, before returning back to the more pressing matter. "So if we eliminate the Heart and Goblin magic, and you've said that you don't want to use Fiendfyre, that just leaves basilisk venom."

"Bill, I have some basilisk parts in my vault," Harry said, suddenly remembering about them. "Professor Dumbledore said he had had them placed in stasis in case I ever needed to sell them for the money."

"I'll take you to Gringotts," Bill offered. "It's out of hours and you won't be able to get in without me."

"Do you think it will work?" Luna asked, now clinging to Hermione again.

"At the moment it's his only hope, but I'm not promising anything," Bill said, and he held out his hand to Harry. "I'll have to apparate you through the wards."

The two then vanished, and Luna gave a soft sob. "I don't want to watch him die, Hermione."

Also not too keen on the idea, Dudley held out his hand. "Come on, I'll take you into the family room."

Watching Luna join Dudley, Hannah decided that she also wanted to go, especially as the goo had now covered Albus entirely. "I can't watch either."

And so Dudley held out his other hand. "We'll all go then."

Grateful for Dudley's concern, Hannah left Justin's side and took Dudley's hand. "Thanks, Dudley."

Before the trio could leave, Hermione spotted something rather alarming. "Dae, what is that shadow?"

Dae turned around to look at where Hermione was pointing. "It's the manifestation of the soul fragment, and as it sucks power from Albus, it's going to grow more solid until it turns into a version of Voldemort."

Hannah shivered with fear. "You mean there would be two Voldemorts?"

"Yes," Dae said, having no idea that the Voldemort he knew had been imprisoned by Tom, or that Tom himself existed.

About to be led out of the room, Luna turned as a crack sounded out, and on spotting who it was, she exclaimed "Harry!", her voice full of hope.

Her hope faded though at the bleak look on Harry's face. "There were no fangs or signs of venom."

"And we now have a growing problem," Dae said, indicating the shadow, which was now starting to become more defined.

Bill looked down at Albus and the fused ring. "Unless we can get that ring off him, the resin that is coating the Headmaster will now start to recede, and..."

Hermione interrupted his speech. "Why?"

"It covered him so that it could feed off him and suck off enough power to initially begin its transformation," Bill said, and he pointed at the top of the Headmaster's head. "You can see it receding now that it has gained enough power to start to transform into that." Bill pointed at the shadowy outline.

Hermione hazarded a guess at the rest of what Bill had been going to explain. "And once that resin has disappeared, that shadow will become another version of Voldemort, and the Professor will die?"

"Spot on," Bill said. "In fact it will become a version of You-Know-Who at whatever age he created the Horcrux."

"So we could be looking at an adult Voldemort who might have that Voldemort's memories?" Hermione asked in horror.

"Will have those memories," Bill confirmed.

Hannah was rather disturbed by this, and she therefore made a nervous suggestion. "Can't we just burn the hand off?"

Bill shook his head. "Fiendfyre would consume everything, and not just the hand."

"What about the Sword of Gryffindor?" Justin asked, bringing up the reason that Bill had originally been brought to Potter Place. "Isn't it worth a try?"

Bill was not so sure. "I've never read anywhere it would work but maybe that's because it has never been used for something like this before. Do you know where it is?" Bill had heard rumors that it was hung in the Headmaster's office, but he had never given much credence to them since there were many different rumors that abounded about the Headmaster.

"At Hogwarts," Dudley piped up, and then went on to confirm that the rumors were in fact true. "In Professor Dumbledore's office."

"And you'd have to get it," Dae informed him, before going on to clarify why. "None of us are Gryffindors."

"Hermione has already told me that she needed for me something because I was a Gryffindor, and I'm happy to do whatever is necessary," Bill responded. "Although I now have a duty to report the Sword's confirmed whereabouts to the Goblins; they still hold a claim on it."

Dae did not a damn about the Goblins' claim. "That's the least of our worries; our biggest one is whether or not it will work."

"Then I'll go fetch it and we'll find out," Bill said, and he prepared to leave.

"Wait," Harry called out, before Bill could disappear. "Fawkes brought the Professor here. When I spoke to him, he said 'Severus, kill me'. I thought you should know before you go to Hogwarts to get the Sword."

"We're laboring under the presumption that perhaps Snape knows something," Dae informed Bill. "And I think that just to be on the safe side I had better go with you, Mr. Weasley."

"It's Bill," Bill corrected Dae's use of his name. "My Dad is Mr. Weasley."

"Bill, I'm Dae Venant," Dae finally introduced himself, and briefly shook hands with him.

Harry stepped forward. "I'm coming as well."

Bill was about to stop him when Dae nodded and gave Harry a warning. "Just be ready with that wand in case of trouble." Then Dae glanced at the darkening shadow. "That thing is growing, so I think we had better be on our way."

The trio vanished and Justin turned to Hermione. "How do you know you can trust Bill?"

"Because of what he does for a living," Hermione said. "Goblins are notorious about the suitability of their human staff, and Bill had to go through rigorous tests and screenings before Gringotts employed him." She gave a wry smile. "And he was the only one at the Burrow."

It was an anxious wait for the children, Luna deciding in the end that she would stay in the room but held against Dudley's chest so that she did not have to look at Albus or the manifestation. Hannah did the same thing, except it was Justin to whom she turned.

Everyone else, however, felt unable to look away from either Albus or the manifestation. But before long it was the manifestation that solely held their rapt attention, the shadow becoming an outline, and

the outline filling in to reveal a pale and still somewhat opaque young man, who had to be close to seventeen or eighteen.

Having kept on taking small peeks at what was unfolding, Hannah was by now getting somewhat panicky. "He's getting to be a little too real for my liking."

Hannah was right, and with Dae, Harry, and Bill still gone, Hermione, made a decision. "I'm going to firecall Amelia Bones if they're not back within five minutes."

After the allotted time period had gone by and none of the men had returned, no-one attempted to talk Hermione out of her decision about contacting the head of BritAD, and within moments Amelia was standing in the sitting room. Her horror was evident as the children filled her in on what had happened. "I'd move him to a secure location but I think you've left it too late." Amelia circled the manifestation that was now in turn watching them.

Everyone, including the manifestation, looked around as three almost simultaneous cracks sounded out and Bill, Harry, and Dae arrived back, Bill bearing the Sword of Gryffindor. "We've got it." He stopped short as he noticed Amelia. "Madam Bones."

"Mr. Weasley." Amelia knew Bill fairly well. "What are you planning to do with that?"

"Cut into the ring on the Headmaster's hand," Bill said. "There's no guarantee it will work though."

"And if you take off the Headmaster's hand in the process?" Amelia asked in alarm.

"I think it's a chance we have to take, and I suspect Albus would do the same if it was one of us lying there," Dae said, speaking for the unconscious headmaster.

"Who are you, and what gives you the right to speak for Albus?" Amelia asked, recognizing Dae but she could not recall from where.

"Dae Venant, an old college friend of Remus', and I've had dealings with Albus through a job he asked me to do," Dae informed her.

"What line of work are you in?" Amelia questioned Dae again as she continued to try and recall from where she knew him.

"I'm a lawyer," Dae said, before revealing he had met Amelia already. "I've actually encountered you in court a few times."

Now Amelia remembered from where she knew his face. "You defended Henry Asus on the murder charge, didn't you?"

"I did," Dae acknowledged, a smile wreathing his face. "And quite successfully."

Amelia's hackles went up at Dae's self-satisfied smile. "If letting a man I believed was guilty walk free, then we have a different opinion of success, Mr. Venant."

"I believed he was innocent," Dae countered. "It was a prerequisite to my taking his case, particularly as it was one where Veritaserum could not be used."

Albus and the manifestation were almost forgotten as everyone's attention was now focused on Amelia and Dae, the antipathy between them very apparent.

Hermione, however, ignored this, as she was more interested in discovering why Veritaserum could not be used on someone during a trial. "Why couldn't it be used?"

"Mr. Asus had a medical condition that precluded him from taking it," Dae informed her, while at the same time glaring at Amelia. "It was this same condition that led me to believe that he could not have performed the murder of which he was accused."

"What condition was it?" Luna asked, her attention now drawn away from Albus.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," Dae said regretfully. "Client confidentiality."

Bill coughed politely as Hermione opened her mouth to ask another question. "I think we should get back to the real reason we're here."

Amelia gave Dae a steely look before agreeing with Bill. "I take it that you've just been to Hogwarts?"

"Yes," Bill confirmed. "Harry said that the Headmaster was begging Snape to kill him, and so we not only collected the Sword but went looking for Snape as well."

"That should be my job, Mr. Weasley," Amelia cautioned Bill.

"We obviously had no idea you would be brought in," Dae joined in the conversation again, his voice full of hostility, "and we needed as much information as possible."

Amelia was aware that she would have done the same thing, but her voice still held no friendliness as she addressed Dae. "And what did Severus Snape have to say?"

Dae again took point, his tone still no friendlier than Amelia's had been. "We ran into him as he was making his way back to the school. According to him, he had just arrived back from St. Mungo's where he had gone looking for Albus. He said that he found Albus semi-conscious in his office. Then before he could do anything to help Albus, Fawkes clamped onto Albus and they vanished. Snape said he presumed that Fawkes had taken him to St. Mungo's, which is why he headed there."

"And you didn't see fit to bring Professor Snape here?" Amelia asked in a voice that said he should have.

Dae shook his head. "He asked, but Harry was not amenable to the idea."

Harry confirmed this, backing Dae and irritating Amelia. "I didn't want that man in my house."

"Then I'll have to arrange to have him taken into BritAD for questioning," Amelia said, more than a little annoyed at Harry's stubbornness, "if you don't mind me using the floo, of course."

"You're already keyed into the wards," Harry informed her, "so you can use the floo in the study; it's back out into the corridor and then the second door to your right."

Amelia was back within a few minutes, walking into an ongoing conversation about why Fawkes had brought Albus to Harry, and she interrupted. "I believe that Albus knew that he was in trouble. And Albus must have believed that you would be able to help him, and maybe he relayed this to Fawkes somehow."

"As much as I'd like to say that we can help, I'm not sure that there's anything we can do. The Sword really is our last hope," Bill said.

"What happens if that thing becomes a real person?" Hannah asked, the idea frightening her beyond reason.

"Then I suspect it will be more powerful than any of us," Bill answered. "It will not only retain the power it is sucking from the Headmaster to manifest but any power in Professor Dumbledore that remains at the end of process will also be at its disposal."

Amelia knew exactly how powerful the Headmaster was, and she finally decided to release this information, keeping her voice low so that it would not carry across the room to where the manifestation was obviously listening. "Albus registers at three hundred and four on the Magus scale."

Bill knew that she could have shouted her words out at the top of her voice for all the difference it would have made. "I'm afraid that our friend here will already know that as the process gives you access to memories as well as power. And it also means that we could be in big trouble, as not only will that thing have the Headmaster's power, it will also have a small portion of the power that You-Know-Who possessed when he made the Horcrux."

Hannah's fear now morphed in absolute terror. "So it's going to kill us, isn't it?"

Justin could feel his girlfriend shaking in his arms. "There are too many of us for it to do that."

"And it doesn't have a wand," Hermione said, her voice revealing how relieved she was about the fact. "We can trap it in here and deal with it."

Harry had never heard Hermione sound so determined or ferocious before. "But if we save the Headmaster, then we won't need to do that, will we?"

Dae shook his head. "If we can destroy the ring, then no, we won't have to deal with that thing, but if comes forth, then we should kill it once it's manifested fully. As Hermione rightly pointed out, it's trapped in here."

"Albus doesn't need a wand to apparate," Amelia revealed. "So if it tries, it might be able to leave, whether we want it to or not."

"Not if we change the wards it won't," Harry said in a fierce voice.

"Then get onto it," Amelia ordered.

Harry went red, and his voice was tinged with embarrassment when he spoke. "I don't know how. I haven't covered that at BritAD yet, and Remus is the one who makes any changes here; I just help him."

Amelia cursed under her breath at her own oversight, and she turned to Bill. "Can you help?"

"Of course," Bill said, and he followed Harry out to where the stone that anchored the wards was situated.

Hermione gave a gasp as the manifestation finally spoke a few moments later. "They're going to be too late, you know. And then I will kill you all, one by one." It stared malevolently at Hannah, and, having been listening, it played on her fears. "And I'll take my time with you."

"Get Bill back," Hannah demanded in alarm, her voice close to hysterical at the manifestation's warning. "Use the Sword."

Aware of where the anchor stone was situated, Hermione vanished, reappearing in front of Harry and Bill. "That thing said we're going to be too late to change the wards. You have to use the Sword to destroy the ring."

Harry grabbed Bill's arm and apparated them both back, and Bill turned to Amelia, bowing to her authority. "I'd like your authorization

to do this, especially as what I'm about to do might prove fatal if something goes wrong. And if you have any medical background it would be a big help. I'm going to need someone to stop the bleeding when I do this; there's no way I can cut into the ring without cutting into the Headmaster."

"Plan all you wish. It won't work," the manifestation sang out in a smug voice.

"I'm a full qualified field medic, and will be able to stem the bleeding," Amelia told Bill, ignoring the thing. "And you have my authorization to use the Sword without any repercussions on you." As a former Hufflepuff, Amelia could not wield the Sword herself, otherwise she would have done it.

The children all turned away as Bill brought the Sword down on Albus' hand, all looking back when Bill swore. Amelia barely spared the Sword a fleeting glance as she repaired the damage to Albus' hand.

"It didn't work. It didn't work." Hannah's voice shook horribly as she looked down and saw that the ring was intact.

She was right, the ring remained firmly on Albus' finger, the Sword having been deflected off it, the result of which was the blade sliding down the ring and slicing through Albus' hand, almost severing it clean off below the knuckles. The manifestation laughed. "You should have listened to me."

Hermione swallowed hard at the nausea that threatened at the sight, but her horror was more for the state of the Sword of Gryffindor than for Albus' hand. "It destroyed the Sword?"

Bill held up the Sword, which now had a huge chunk missing from the blade. "It's not strong enough. I hoped it might be as it was Goblin-made."

"So what do we do?" Hannah asked, her panic worsening. "I can't see through him anymore."

"Cut off Albus' hand," Amelia ordered.

"I don't think it will work," Bill countered.

"Just do it," Amelia snapped, aware that they were running out of time and options.

Bill immediately swung the Sword around and down onto Albus' wrist; even with the gash in the blade it sliced through the flesh and bone like butter, sending blood spurting everywhere.

Amelia sealed the wound and stopped the bleeding, but it was obvious that the exercise had been unsuccessful. The manifestation just grinned. "How does it feel to know you've failed?"

For a moment the room became silent, except for the sound of weeping from Hannah. Then Amelia spoke up, her voice stony. "We have no other option left to us. We have to kill Albus."

It was too much for Luna and she burst into tears, finally being led out of the room by Dudley. Also close to tears, Hermione shook her head. "We can't do that."

As much as he loathed Amelia, Dae knew she was right and he therefore agreed with the head of BritAD. "Madam Bones is right, Hermione. It's the only way, because if we don't and we let that thing become fully formed, then Voldemort will become Master of the Elder Wand."

Amelia's eyes widened at the implications of Dae's words. "You know about the Elder Wand?"

Dae wondered if she would trust him a little more now that he had revealed something so important. "Yes. And we both know that Albus would never have told me about it if I had not been in his confidence."

"Um, sorry to butt in, but where is the Wand?" Justin interrupted before Amelia could respond.

"I bet Snape took it," Harry said immediately, still not having trusted Severus' part in what was happening. "And that he did this."

Amelia could see now why Dae had agreed with Harry not to bring Severus back with them, Harry's hatred of the potions master evident in his voice. "Harry, throughout everything so far that has

been related to You-Know-Who or any of his followers' actions, Severus Snape has come up clean."

"I still don't trust him," Harry said adamantly. "No matter how clean he has come up."

Amelia also did not trust Severus but given that so far he had done nothing wrong, she could find no reason to suspect him. "When I go back to BritAD, I'll question him about whether he has taken it, but to be truthful, Harry, I have the feeling that he won't have." And she then repeated Hermione's earlier supposition. "And I certainly couldn't see Albus begging Professor Snape to kill him if the Professor had instigated this or taken the Wand."

"That still doesn't tell us where the Wand is," Dae pointed out. "Nor is it helping to solve our current problem."

"As I've just said, I believe there is only one answer to our current problem," Amelia responded.

Bill agreed with her. "If we can't get the ring off him, then the only way to stop this version of Voldemort coming forth, is to kill the Headmaster."

A thought occurred to Amelia and she turned to Harry. "I now believe I know why Fawkes brought Albus here. I think Albus knew he was destined to die, and he wanted you to be the one to kill him."

"But why?" Justin asked, not getting it.

"Because I believe that Albus wants Harry to become the Master of the Elder Wand," Amelia said, "and not You-Know-Who."

Harry shook his head. "I don't care if he wanted that. I won't do it. I won't kill him."

"Well, someone is going to have to kill him," Hermione said, her voice shaking. "Look."

Everyone turned to look at the manifestation, which by now was more or less fully formed, made obvious by the fact that it had picked up a vase. "Don't mind me."

Harry reacted without thinking. "Reducto."

The spell simply passed through what appeared to be solid matter and impacted the wall behind. The manifestation smiled at Harry. "I can touch things but you can't harm me. A pity for you it doesn't go both ways."

Hannah ducked as the vase was hurled at her, sailing over her head and smashing into the wall. She immediately went to pieces. "Somebody kill it! Just kill it! Just kill it!"

Justin hushed his girlfriend who dissolved into more frightened tears. "It's not going to hurt you, Hannah. I won't let it."

The manifestation walked over to the couple and around them. "I'm so going to enjoy hurting you."

"Just shut up!" Hannah screamed, unable to take it anymore.

"I'm taking her into the other room," Justin said, leading Hannah out, much to the relief of everyone in the room.

Amelia immediately got back down to business. "Harry, you already have my consent to do what must be done."

Harry refused yet again. "I'm not killing him, Amelia."

Amelia placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know you don't want to do it, but I'm absolutely convinced that Fawkes brought Albus here so that it would be you who killed him."

Harry still couldn't do it. "I just can't, Amelia."

Amelia looked Harry in the eye. "You have level one clearance, Harry, just as a fully fledged Auror would, and..."

Harry broke in. "I know that, but even though I'm getting defensive training, I'm not a fully fledged Auror, I'm still just a kid."

"Killing him might not be necessary." Dae, who was standing closest to Albus, interrupted the conversation between Harry and Amelia. "There's no residue around the ring now, and it doesn't look as if it's fused to his skin now."

Bill aimed his wand at Albus' hand, which still had several tentacles of resin linking it to his wrist, the only remaining area on Albus' body where the sticky substance now remained. "Accio Slytherin's ring."

Despite Bill's effort, the ring remained where it was, and the manifestation laughed. "Nice try, but you're doomed to failure."

Irritated, Dae knelt down, intending to try and take the ring manually, only for Bill to stop him. "Even though I cut the hand off, because the fragment is still attached, albeit minimally, I'm afraid that if you try to take the ring, then the entity will be able to extract whatever power you have as well."

Hermione's bottom lip trembled as Dae grudgingly climbed back to his feet. "So there's nothing we can do?"

"We have to kill him," Amelia said, withdrawing her wand.

The manifestation immediately made a move to stop the execution. "Do that, and I won't be able to tell you about Sirius Black."

This caught Amelia's attention. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't you want to know the truth about him?" The manifestation asked, a sly smile playing over its lips. "I have access to Dumbledore's memories."

"What about Black?" Amelia snapped.

Dae decided that action had to be taken to stop the manifestation from landing them all in trouble, and he pointed at the hand, which by now had only two strands of resin left linking it to Albus' body. "We haven't got time to go over old history. Look at the hand!"

Everyone's attention immediately switched to the hand, and even as they watched, one of the final two strands of resin vanished.

Bill turned to Amelia in alarm. "It's almost over. Someone has to act now!"

Aware that Harry was not going to be able to do what needed to be done, Amelia's answer was to resignedly take out her wand, and

she directed her speech towards the prone figure on the floor. "Albus, I'm sorry, so very sorry."

The manifestation's eyes widened as it realized what Amelia was about to do, especially as it was just moments from fully materializing. "No! Dumbledore helped Black to..."

"Avada Kedavra." The sentence was cut off, Amelia having closed her eyes and incanted the spell she knew would end Albus' life while the thing was speaking.

The manifestation screamed out in pain and fear as the source of its power was cut off, and it immediately began to fade, vanishing completely after a few moments. Suspecting that now Albus was dead he could handle the dismembered hand safely, Bill made the most of the window of opportunity he now had. "I'm going to take the hand somewhere protected to deal with it."

After picking up the hand, Bill vanished, and Harry turned to Amelia. "What exactly is he going to do?"

"Destroy the hand and ring before the soul fragment can re-establish itself," Dae responded before Amelia could say anything.

"It can do that?" Hermione asked.

"We didn't destroy it," Dae explained what he believed to be the position. "Madam Bones merely cut off its power source when she killed the Headmaster, and I believe it went back inside the ring."

"And it won't attack Bill?" Justin asked, thinking that maybe the young man had taken a huge risk.

"I believe the abrupt withdrawal of power would have caused an immense shock, and so hopefully it won't be able to attack again just yet," Dae said.

"And what if the power it drained from the Headmaster had the opposite effect?" Hermione asked.

"Then we're going to be in big trouble." Amelia finally managed to get a word in edgewise, before kneeling down and removing a ring from her left index finger.

Hermione guessed she was going to place it on Albus, and she called out in fear. "Don't touch him! He might not be safe!"

Amelia looked up, and gently offered reassurance to the girl, who unlike her fellow female comrades, had held up well until that moment. "I'm just placing it on his chest, Hermione." She then did as she said she was going to before standing back up and softly murmuring, "BritAD Mortuary, Authorization Amelia Bones, Code Silver."

A tearful Hermione slipped her hand into Harry's as Albus' body vanished. "What's a code silver?"

"It means that no report will be issued for the cause of death until I've spoken to the coroner," Amelia said. "The ring recorded my orders."

"What are you going to announce to the public?" Harry asked, conscious that Amelia could not tell the truth.

"A spell gone wrong causing a heart attack," Amelia decided after a moment's thought. "I can't afford for alarm to spread over this."

"And what about his wand?" Hermione asked, bringing up the subject again.

"I'll go to Hogwarts myself and see what I can find," Amelia said. And then she brought up the one thing no-one wanted to discuss. "Does anyone know what it was talking about when it mentioned Black?"

Dae answered on everyone's behalf. "Does it matter? Black is dead. It was just trying to buy time for itself to manifest fully."

Keeping just as cool a head, Hermione agreed. "It almost worked too. If Dae hadn't spotted that the resin had almost receded, we would have all been too busy listening to notice that that thing had manifested fully."

Still unwilling to let the matter drop, Amelia fixed Dae with a steely stare. "You're sure you don't know about what it was talking about?"

Dae met her stare without flinching. "Of course. I've already told you that I don't deal with people who are guilty, not even for someone of Professor Dumbledore's standing."

Amelia's hackles went up again at the inference to the case she had been prosecuting and lost to Dae. "Quite." Then, not having any reason to disbelieve Dae, other than instinct, she dropped the matter and changed the subject. "I think someone can bring Hannah and the others back in."

On her return, Hannah noticed immediately that two people were missing. "Where's Bill and the Headmaster?"

Amelia told her. "Albus' body has been sent to the morgue, and Mr. Weasley has taken the ring to destroy it."

Luna's fears returned. "Will he be alright?"

"We don't know," Amelia said softly.

Luna turned her face into Dudley's chest, and let him hold her as she started to cry again. A short time later a crack sounded out, and Luna turned around in hope. "Bill!"

Bill was almost knocked over when Luna left Dudley and torpedoed into him, wrapping her arms around him. "I'm fine, Luna."

Luna gave a really loud sob. "I can't bear to lose anyone else I care about."

Having known Luna since she was a small child, Bill was hardly surprised at her reaction, and he placed a sooty hand on her blonde head. "Luna, I'm fine."

Luna continued to cry and cling to him, and so Bill talked over her head. "I used Fiendfyre to destroy the hand and ring." He held out his free hand and uncurled his fist to reveal a black stone. "Only this remained at the end."

Amelia took it. "If the legend is right, then this is a Deathly Hallow, awarded by Death himself."

"Is that why it survived the Fiendfyre?" Hermione enquired, craning her neck to see the stone.

"I would guess so," Amelia said. Turning around, she spotted that Harry had sunk to the floor, his head in his hands. "Do you feel alright?"

Harry looked up, his dismay evident. "Someone is probably going to have to do that to me one day."

Bill's attention was now focused on Harry. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a Horcrux," Harry revealed. "Dae used a spell to find out if the Sword of Gryffindor was one, and it turned out that I was."

Unaware of this, Amelia was shocked. "You didn't think to tell me?"

Hermione immediately jumped in. "It doesn't matter that he is. We're trying to find a way to get the soul fragment out of Harry."

Bill gently disentangled himself from Luna, handing her over to Dudley again, before kneeling down and placing a consoling hand on Harry's arm. "I'm so sorry, Harry, but there is no way to do that."

Hermione refused to believe Bill. "That's impossible. The prophecy says that Harry..."

"It doesn't say that I can't die," Harry said, interrupting her.

"Um, what prophecy?" Bill asked, wondering what they were going on about.

Harry recited it in a wooden voice. "...and so we all thought that there might be a chance."

"Do you want me to be honest?" Bill asked, after hearing it. "Or lie to you?"

"I'd prefer honesty," Harry said.

"There really is no way to remove the fragment without killing you, Harry," Bill said.

"But what about the prophecy?" Luna asked.

"Perhaps Harry is meant to kill You-Know-Who but at the same he's going to have to die himself in order to do it," Bill said, his voice somber and full of sorrow. "I'm sorry to be so blunt, Harry. But I've read a significant amount of text that the Goblins possess on the subject of Horcruxes, and I've seen nothing that would allow a soul splinter to be removed without the destruction of the vessel in which it resides."

Hermione refused to accept that. "There has to be a way or a book you haven't read. I won't believe that we can't help Harry."

Bill went on, putting an even bigger dampener on Hermione's hopes. "Goblin texts go back even further than wizarding ones. They're the ones who created the concept of the Horcrux."

"Why would they do that?" Dudley asked, wondering what on earth had possessed the Goblins to create something so horrible. "Did they want to live forever or something?"

"I can't tell you that," Bill said apologetically. "It's a Goblin secret, and what I've told you already is cutting it close for me. The only reason I've told you as much as I have is because of your unique situation and who Harry is."

Forced with the reality of the situation, Harry again dropped his head into knees. "I think I always knew that I'd have to die." Then he straightened up and got to his feet. "Excuse me." Then he vanished.

Hermione also vanished but reappeared a few moments later. "I thought he'd gone to his room but he's not there."

"He needs some time alone," Amelia said. "We've just cut him off at the knees and taken away his only hope."

"You mean I have." Bill shouldered the responsibility. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"You might have actually helped us," Dae told him, feeling a little more positive about the whole Horcrux concept for the first time since they had learnt about Harry's problem. "At least now we have

an idea of where Horcruxes originated from, and it gives us somewhere else to look for an answer."

Bill truly didn't think they would find one, but he smiled encouragingly at the lawyer nevertheless. "I obviously haven't read every book that exists on the subject, so I might be wrong."

"You have to be," Hermione said, her voice wobbling. "Otherwise what's the point?" She too then vanished.

Amelia sighed, and got back to business. "Mr. Weasley and Mr. Venant I'll need you to come with me to make statements."

Suspecting that Amelia was probably going to ask him to voluntarily take Veritaserum, Dae found himself thanking his lucky stars that as a Death Eater, he had deliberately gone through the process to build up an immunity to the substance. "Of course. I'll be happy to help with anything."

Amelia intended to ask him about Sirius, but at the same time she had the feeling that she was going to get nothing. "Thank you. We should be off."

"You don't need Harry?" Justin asked, thinking it odd that Amelia had not included Harry.

Amelia shook her head. "Not right now. But I will be requiring everyone to make a statement at some point."

St. Bart's Hospital

Sirius entered his office to find a teary eyed Hermione waiting for him. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Professor Dumbledore is dead," Hermione blurted out, "and Harry is missing."

Sirius took her into his arms as she started crying. "Hermione, I know you're upset, but I need to know what's gone on."

In a halting voice, Hermione told him everything that had happened. "And so I thought I'd better come here. I didn't want you to get the

message we'd left for you and come to Potter Place, especially after what that thing said to Amelia Bones about you and the Professor."

"Thank you for the warning," Sirius said, his voice choked with the tears that he had shed during Hermione's recitation. "Has anyone contacted Remus?"

"I don't know," Hermione sniffed into Sirius' shoulder, glad of his comforting bulk.

"I imagine that Bones will," Sirius decided. "Remus will have to take on the role of headmaster now that Albus is gone." Sirius' voice caught on the final word and he struggled to hold back his tears once more. "I can't believe he's gone."

"Neither can I," Hermione said, and she started to cry again. However, after a few minutes she pulled herself together and stepped away from Sirius. "I'll apparate home and check to see what's going on. I have to find Harry."

"I think he just needs a little time alone," Sirius said, echoing Amelia.

Hermione thought differently. "Right now it's the last thing he needs, and I intend to find him."

"Then you should head back. I'll go to my apartment if you need me," Sirius said, stymied from heading to Potter Place with Amelia being there. "I've finished here."

It was only then that Hermione remembered why Sirius had been unavailable. "How did the operation go?"

Sirius sadly shook his head. "She didn't make it."

Hermione could see that the latest news hadn't helped. "I'm sorry."

"It's just one of those things," Sirius said, but his face said otherwise. "Now go find Harry."

Once Hermione had left, Sirius locked his door and gave in to his misery. Then, aware that he had told Hermione that he would be at his apartment, he wiped his eyes, grabbed his helmet, and then headed for the staff parking lot to collect his bike, not entirely

trusting himself to apparate. After riding home and parking the bike in the basement, he climbed into the elevator, surprised when it stopped on the ground floor and the doors opened to reveal Anna Jameson standing there. "Anna, I thought you were in New York."

"I had to come back for a meeting, but I'm returning first thing tomorrow," Anna said, noticing how drawn Sirius looked. "Is everything alright?"

"I've just had some bad news about an old friend, as well as losing a patient," Sirius responded truthfully.

"So you won't be coming to New York," Anna surmised. As Sirius nodded, she reached out and placed a hand on his arm. "Is there anything I can do? I could cancel the rest of my trip."

"Don't do that," Sirius immediately said. "You can't do anything, and I won't be good company for the next few days."

"You're sure?" Anna checked.

"Perfectly," Sirius assured her. He then held the elevator door open when they reached Anna's floor. "I hope you have a good trip back."

Anna stepped out, the milk she had popped out to buy clutched against her chest. Just as the elevator doors were about to close, she called out, "Simon, hold on."

Sirius pressed the requisite button and waited while Anna let herself into her apartment. When she came back out she was clutching a business card. "I know we've only been out to dinner once, and that even though you were coming out to New York to see me, you hardly know me. But if you do need anything, even if it's just to talk, then call me."

Sirius took the card, and then he leaned forward, gently kissing Anna's cheek. "Anna, thank you."

Anna stepped back into the elevator, and placing her hand on Sirius' cheek, she lightly kissed his lips, before stepping back out again. "You're welcome, Simon."

As the doors closed, Sirius found himself smiling for the first time that day.

Potter Place

Hermione apparated in to find the house deathly quiet. "Hello?"

Harry came running out. "Hermione!"

Hermione flung her arms around her boyfriend. "I was so worried about you."

Harry gave her an apologetic look. "I went to the park by where I used to live and sat on the swings feeling sorry for myself. Dudley and Luna found me."

"How did they know where to look?" Hermione asked.

"It's where I used to go to get away from Dudley, and when they couldn't find me at the chip shop in Redhill, he guessed I might have gone there," Harry said. "They said you had gone looking for me. Where did you go?"

"I went to the hospital to see Dr. White," Hermione said, still unsure whether or not it was safe to mention Sirius' name.

"It's okay," Harry told her. "Amelia's gone. It's just us lot. Remus is due back at any moment though. What did Sirius say?"

"He said if we need him he's gone back to his apartment," Hermione said, dropping her head onto Harry's shoulder. "He's really upset about the Headmaster, and his patient didn't make it."

Harry hugged Hermione closer. "An awful day all round then."

It was hard to miss the despair in Harry's voice, and Hermione pulled back to look at him. "Bill doesn't know everything, Harry."

"That's what Luna said," Harry said, but it was evident from the defeated tone in his voice that he didn't believe her.

"And she's right," Hermione said forcefully. "We will find an answer, Harry."

Harry pulled Hermione against him again, burying his face in her hair. "I hope so."

"I promise everything will be alright," Hermione whispered against his neck.

And even though there was no way Hermione could guarantee it, for the first time since he had found out about being a Horcrux, for some unknown reason, Harry found himself believing his girlfriend.

Next Chapter: Severus has a meeting with Tom; Remus makes a surprise announcement; Cordelia has a memory stirred up.

Chapter 59: A Face Remembered?

13th July 1996 - Laurifer Manor

Severus bowed low before Tom, and noticed what he was holding almost immediately. "I'm relieved to see you have the Elder Wand."

"Malfoy delivered it yesterday," Tom said, displaying it more fully for Severus. "Why didn't you?"

Severus had expected this. "I decided that should something go wrong, it would be better if I had no knowledge of who had taken the Wand, and so I left it up to Draco to arrange for someone to take it after Dumbledore took the bait, and for it to be brought here. Only after I was certain that the deed had been done did I enter his office."

"And so absolving you from the crime of the theft of the Elder Wand," Tom said approvingly.

"It was a good thing I did," Severus said. "Unfortunately Fawkes removed Dumbledore from Hogwarts before the procedure was complete, and the damn bird delivered him to Potter. I was required to make a statement to Amelia Bones about my involvement in the matter."

Tom's lips tightened at the first news of a possible setback in his carefully laid out plans. "How did Bones know you were involved?"

"Dumbledore apparently begged me to kill him after he was delivered to Potter, so he must have still been aware of his surroundings up until then. Although I don't understand how that could have been possible; in the short time that I sat watching the soul fragment consuming him, he said nothing to me, and his eyes remained closed," Severus said.

"And yet you say he mentioned you, Severus," Tom noted. "Do you know exactly what he might have said?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably at the slightly cutting manner of Tom's address. "It seems that his final words were 'Severus, kill me'."

"I imagine then that rather than begging you to kill him, he was actually identifying you before asking Potter to kill him," Tom surmised quite correctly, working out what everyone else had missed, including Harry himself. "Did Bones tell you how he died?"

Severus passed on what Amelia had told him. "Apparently he had a massive heart attack."

"If that happened, then the procedure must have failed." Tom again determined the outcome correctly. "So if Dumbledore is dead, the soul fragment must be back inside the Horcrux. Where is it?"

"I don't know," Severus had to admit, not having dared to mention the ring during his interview with the head of BritAD. "When I asked Bones if she knew what had caused the heart attack and the substance I said I saw on Dumbledore, she said that it had been a spell gone wrong."

"So either she has no idea that the ring was a Horcrux, or she does, has destroyed it, and doesn't want you to know about it," Tom deduced from this. "Bones is far from stupid, so I believe the latter option is the perception I should labor under."

Severus concurred with Tom's viewpoint. "I agree."

Tom brought up Dumbledore's final words again. "Given what Dumbledore said, you're absolutely certain that Bones didn't suspect your hand in any of this?"

"No, I don't believe so," Severus said, before outlining what he had said to Amelia. "I swore an oath to the effect that I had not taken the Wand nor did I know for certain who had, although I said I suspected that it might have been one of the Dark Lord's followers."

Tom smirked. "I like your twisted use of the truth."

"Thank you." Severus bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement and then went on. "I also told her that I headed for St. Mungo's the moment Fawkes vanished with Dumbledore to see if the bird had taken him there. And when I discovered it had not, I said that I headed back to the school, where I ran into Bill Weasley, Potter, and a man named Dae Venant; they were looking for me." Severus had not spotted the Sword of Gryffindor, which Bill had wisely secreted

beneath his cloak, and Severus had therefore believed that the three had only been at Hogwarts to find him.

Dae's name was unfamiliar to Tom, and from how Severus had phrased his words, he guessed the same to be true of Severus. "Who is this Venant?"

Severus had no idea. "I don't know. He just gave his name, nothing else. He then informed me that the Headmaster was at Potter's home, and demanded to know what I knew about it. I told him the same as I told Bones, and then when I demanded to see Dumbledore and offered my assistance, Venant refused it."

Tom tapped his chin with the Elder Wand. "I'll have Venant looked into. I can't afford for any more glitches in my plan." He then returned to the subject of Severus' interrogation. "So did Bones have anything else to say?"

"Just that an announcement will be made in the Prophet sometime today about Dumbledore, and, given that I had nothing to do with what had happened, that I was free to go," Severus responded.

"And when were you released?" Tom asked, trying to determine if it had been a lengthy, and therefore suspicious, interrogation.

"Last night, but it was after midnight, which is why I came here first thing this morning," Severus explained, aware that Tom hated to be disturbed late at night, no matter what the reason was.

"Then let us hope that your part in this is now over, Severus," Tom said, deciding to get in touch with a contact at the Ministry to verify everything that Severus had just said. "And as from now, I want you to keep your nose clean; I need you in Hogwarts to implement the second part of my plan."

Severus was well aware of that. "The potion is almost nearing completion. Another few weeks and it will be ready, except for the addition of Potter's blood."

"You've managed to obtain a sample of Lupin's blood?" Tom asked, something finally surprising him.

Severus nodded, having gotten an old dried up one from the Shrieking Shack, although he could not exactly reveal this to Tom. "He hurt himself a while back and didn't bother to mop up the blood."

Tom did not care about the details. "As long as you have it, then that's enough, particularly given that he's probably going to be appointing you as the deputy head now that Dumbledore is dead."

Severus thought differently. "As I've already mentioned, Lupin and I don't see eye to eye, and I have a feeling he's going to ask either Flitwick or Viking."

"Then we'll simply have to persuade one of them to hand over the wards once Lupin is dead," Tom said, running his hand lovingly down the Elder Wand.

"And what about your ring?" Severus asked, noting how Tom was caressing the wand.

"I have contacts in the Ministry," Tom said, without identifying them. "I'll find out what happened to my ring that way."

Hogwarts - 22nd July 1996

Remus flicked his wand at the large doors to close them. "Thank Merlin, that's over."

Cordelia slipped her hand into Remus'. "You knew it would be a bad day."

"I did, but I didn't expect it to be that bad," Remus said, tugging Cordelia into his arms and holding her against him. "I've never seen so many people in tears like that before, and Fawkes' song almost undid me."

"You held up well," Cordelia said, having been surprised that Remus had not broken down.

"With everyone looking to me as Albus' replacement, I didn't feel that I could do anything else," Remus said as he released her and started to head towards the main staircase. "And right now, replacement or not, I could really do without this meeting."

"The teachers have a right to know what's been decided," Cordelia responded as she trailed Remus up the stairs. "I might not have super hearing but even I couldn't miss the various comments about Hogwarts closing."

Remus had also overheard the comments. "I found myself wondering if it might be dangerous to keep it open."

"None of the students will be trying to destroy a Horcrux, Remus," Cordelia pointed out. "What happened to Albus was awful but he should never have tried to destroy the ring without someone else being there."

"I still can't understand why he did," Remus said, shaking his head. "And the fact his wand is still missing is most worrying."

"Perhaps Fawkes took it, and he was intending to give it to Harry if Harry killed Albus." Cordelia repeated, just as she had been doing all week, what she believed had happened.

"Which means that he should have given it to Amelia, but Fawkes didn't," Remus responded, continuing to disagree with his wife's viewpoint. "As I've said from the start, something just isn't right."

"You still don't think that Severus Snape had anything to do with this, like Harry does, do you?" Cordelia asked, Harry having made his opinion quite clear about his thoughts on the entire incident.

Remus shook his head. "You know as well as I do that Severus would have died if he had lied under magical oath about his involvement."

"In that case we have no leads, and even though I know it's frustrating, we're just going to have to hope that Fawkes turns up with it," Cordelia said.

"And if he doesn't?" Remus asked.

"Then we might never know what happened to it," Cordelia had to admit, before stopping before the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to what was now Remus' office. "And at this moment, you have more important things to worry about. Not only do you have to

announce the staff appointments but you still have OWL and NEWT results to get out."

Remus groaned. "And the new curriculum to implement, stationery to order, food supplies to..."

Cordelia clamped a hand over his mouth. "If you keep that up, you'll make the task seem insurmountable."

"Right now it feels as if it is," Remus admitted, having removed Cordelia's hand. "I honestly don't know how Albus did it."

"The same way you're going to," Cordelia said, "step by step by step. And the first one is to go up there and deal with those waiting teachers."

"Did I ever tell you that sometimes you're as bossy as Hermione?" Remus asked, a smile on his lips.

"No, but I like that," Cordelia said, smiling back. "I always let Edmund walk all over me, and, after he died, I told myself that if I ever got involved with anyone again, then I would have an equal say in the relationship."

"And you have," Remus said, kissing Cordelia on her nose. "And I don't know what I'd do without you and your say."

"Absolutely nothing because you're one of this world's procrastinators, and you worry too much about people are going to think," Cordelia responded, and she glanced up the staircase. "Just like I know you're doing right now."

Remus also glanced in the same direction, before sighing in resignation. "In that case, I'd better get going. But first, are you sure you don't want me to take you to join Harry and the others?"

Cordelia pursed her lips. "Procrastinator!"

Still making no effort to move, Remus retorted, "Bossy Madam!"

Cordelia proved she was exactly that as she took the first step onto the staircase. "If you won't go and tell them, then I will."

Even though it was not the norm, Remus was glad that Cordelia would be accompanying him, and he took hold of her hand and joined her on the bottom step. "Then let's go tell them what's been decided."

Covent Garden

Harry rose to his feet when Remus, Cordelia, and Lucy apparated into Sirius' apartment. "How did it go?"

"I expected Severus to complain more than he did about the new curriculum," Remus said, lowering himself onto a sofa, and tugging Cordelia so that she could sit on his lap. "But overall it went well."

"So did you ask Professor Flitwick to be your deputy?" Hermione asked in hope, unaware of whom Remus had intended to ask, Remus refusing to tell any of the children of his plans until after he had spoken with all of the teachers.

Remus shook his head. "He told me during the week that he's still planning to retire at the end of the school year, and he's more adamant than ever about that now that Albus has died."

Luna had also hoped that her head of house would be appointed as Remus' deputy, and she was rather disappointed by the news that this was not to be the case. "So who is going to become the deputy head?"

"Frank Longbottom," Remus announced in a surprise move.

Harry was rather taken aback. "But he was training to become an Auror again."

"He decided that too much had changed," Remus said, letting everyone in on the conversations he had shared with Frank a week earlier, and then again a few days ago. "And when I offered him the Defense post for a year, he accepted. And then, when Filius, and then Aurora, refused the deputy head's position, both they and the other teachers all backed me up when I said I was going to offer the deputy's position to Frank."

"Why him?" Hermione asked, as shocked as everyone else. "Isn't he inexperienced for that sort of thing?"

"Yes, but his background as an Auror involved a great deal of paperwork, Frank is good at coping under pressure, and he's looking for a longterm commitment," Remus explained.

"But even if he is the deputy, the Defense position only lasts for a year," Hannah pointed out. "What happens then?"

"Then I will slot Frank into another spot," Remus said. "With the new schedule, I have several options."

"And what about Tonks?" Harry asked, having enjoyed the Defense classes he had had with her.

"She's going to be covering any history classes I can't, helping Lucy out until she qualifies fully in February, and teaching the new History of Combat class to the first years," Remus said, revealing one of the four new subjects that been introduced into the curriculum by the World Educational Magical Authority. "And she'll spend the remaining three days a week at university, training to become a lecturer, so that she can take a teaching post at BritAD."

"I think Tonks is taking on too much," Harry said, worried about the young woman.

Remus put Harry's mind at rest. "Tonks will only cover my classes when I'm indisposed, and if doing everything she's trying to do becomes too much, then it's been agreed that I'll find someone else to take on the History of Combat classes."

"Are you going to move Frank into that spot after his year as Defense teacher is up?" Harry asked, curious if this was what Remus was intending.

"I'm debating it, but at the moment it's too early to decide, and it is only a class for the first years. After that it's dropped from the curriculum," Remus explained, not having expected the children to grill him so thoroughly, and they were far from finished as Luna also joined in questioning him about Frank.

"And what about if Frank Longbottom doesn't work out?" Luna asked. "Will Professor Flitwick become the deputy then?"

"No, Lucy has agreed to step into the deputy head's shoes if that happens." Remus smiled at Lucy as he spoke. "I would have offered her the position now but she's still busy studying, and she said that she doesn't have time to deal with any more than she already has on."

"I half expected Severus to hex me when Remus said I was the back-up," Lucy grinned as she said it.

"And Snape didn't kick up a fuss about being passed over?" Harry asked, unable to imagine the potions master not doing so.

"He grumbled about a former, completely unqualified Gryffindor holding the position, but that was it," Remus revealed. "I had expected more of a complaint, but I think he knew that there was no chance of my offering the position to him."

"I still bet he was angry," Harry said.

Remus shrugged. "I couldn't tell."

"He's still using the dampening potion?" Dae asked.

"He knows what I am, so yes," Remus said.

Hermione was more interested in the new subjects than Severus, and so she butted in, impatient to talk about the new curriculum. "You mentioned the Combat class. What are the other new classes?"

"English Language, Latin, and Wizarding Biology," Remus answered, and then went on to explain the reasoning behind their inclusion in the curriculum before one of the children could ask. "WEMA didn't think that students were getting a rounded enough education, and so all pupils have to take English Language and Latin up to and including fifth year, and Wizarding Biology up to and including third year." He watched Hermione's face take on a look of hope. "No, Hermione. You have enough to do."

Hermione sagged. "But Latin would be really useful, and I've only just missed out."

Remus relented a little. "I can spare a couple of hours at weekends to teach you some Latin if you're that interested."

Hermione's face lit up. "I am. What about the other classes?"

Remus shook his head. "You don't need to take English Language, and I doubt that Severus would be too thrilled about giving you private lessons."

"He's teaching Wizarding Biology?" Hannah asked, surprised that the potions master would be qualified to teach biology. "Isn't Snape more like a Muggle chemistry teacher than a biology one?"

"You have to know how potions affect the body to become a potions master, and the class will be explaining the basics of this, which is why Severus will be teaching it," Remus explained. "But it is going to be very basic, and it will therefore only be a one lesson per week class."

Hermione gave another sigh. "It's not fair. I still would have loved to have taken that as well."

Everyone else shuddered, particularly Justin, who had taken Latin in his Muggle school. "Well, I for one, can safely say I'm glad I didn't have to. Who is going to be teaching the other new classes?"

"I'm bringing in two new teachers," Remus informed Justin, "one of whom you already all know."

"Who?" Hermione asked excitedly.

Her excitement vanished when Remus revealed the name of the Latin teacher. "Percy Weasley is going to be employed to teach Latin."

"Percy Weasley?" Harry asked out loud. "How is he qualified to teach it?"

"Percy took it upon himself to take evening classes while he has been employed at the Ministry," Remus explained. "He has learned enough to teach the basic first year class to the first to fifth years, and will also be continuing his own education at the same time."

"Why didn't you bring in a fully qualified teacher?" Dae asked. "It would make more sense."

"And cost more money," Remus responded. "Even though WEMA have mandated that these new subjects be included in the curriculum, the extra money has to come from the school's own coffers. I've therefore had to do some serious financial reorganization."

"Will fees go up?" Hermione asked, remembering what George had said about money being tight for the Weasleys, and thinking about how such an increase might affect someone like Ron.

Remus nodded. "Yes, but not until next year. And so at the moment it makes sense to employ someone like Percy."

Hermione shuddered as she thought about what it would be like to be taught by Percy. "I'm glad I'm not in his class."

Remus decided to tease the girl. "I thought you wanted to learn Latin, Hermione."

Hermione shuddered yet again. "I do, but not with Percy Weasley. I mean I love learning, but whenever I stayed at the Burrow he was worse than me when it came down to studying and stuff."

Luna grinned at her friend. "You're sure about that?"

Hermione nudged her. "Oh, shut up." She then asked about the second professor. "Who's going to be teaching English Language?"

"A Professor Jennifer Roberts," Remus said. "And I almost forgot, there will be another teacher, a Professor Maximus Jones, who will be covering the history classes from the first to fifth years, since no matter how hard I try I won't be able to cover them as well as running the school."

Hermione was hoping to take history, and she wanted to make sure that Remus would still be teaching her. "So you're definitely still going to be teaching the sixth and seventh years?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, except for when I'm indisposed, and, as I've already said, Tonks will cover those classes." He turned his head as Sirius opened his eyes and yawned. "Did we wake you?"

Sirius stretched out. "I didn't get any sleep last night. We had several emergencies at the hospital and I got called in."

No-one had realized, Sirius saying nothing before the funeral service, which he had attended under cover of polyjuice potion. "Why don't you go to bed?" Remus suggested. "We can get together some other time."

"I'm intending to go to New York in a few days' time if I possibly can manage it, and so I'd like to go over what we know sooner rather than later," Sirius said, and pointed to the pensieve that was sitting on the table. "So let's move on to what we're really here for."

With Albus' death and everything else that had gone on since then, it had been nigh on impossible to get everyone together to discuss what had happened. Apart from Sirius, Remus had been the busiest out of everyone, having had to attend numerous meetings with all of the teachers, Amelia, WEMA, and Cornelius Fudge. It had therefore been agreed that Remus, and anyone else who had not yet seen Harry's memory of what had happened at Potter Place, would wait until after the funeral to view the memory.

Aware that he could not put it off any longer, Remus stood up, lifting Cordelia to her feet. "After today I'm not sure how well I'm going to deal with watching this."

Unlike earlier when she had teased him about putting things off, this time, upon hearing the strain in her husband's voice, Cordelia instead linked her fingers through Remus' and said softly, "I'm going to be with you every step of the way."

Remus turned to her. "I thought you didn't want to see this."

"I don't but I do want to be there for you," Cordelia said, her face full of love and concern for Remus.

Remus drew Cordelia into a hug, taking strength from holding her close. "I love you."

"And I love you," Cordelia said in return.

Dae interrupted the tender moment, his voice terse. "I don't know about anyone else, but I have no wish to see that memory again."

One by one everyone else said that they felt the same way, and so it was only Sirius, Lucy, Remus, and Cordelia who entered the pensieve. None of them, however, got to see Albus' final words, as Harry had chosen to start the memory from the moment he had apparated in with Dae.

Cordelia slipped her arm around Remus' waist as the memory unfolded. "We can take a break at any time if you need to."

Remus squeezed his wife's arm. "I know."

Lucy was finding it just as hard as Remus to deal with the memory as she watched the man on the floor being consumed. "This is horrid."

Sirius put his arm around Lucy. "I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this."

Leaning into Sirius' side, Lucy felt a little better having someone holding her. "Me neither. I don't know how the children held it together."

"Hannah didn't, according to Amelia," Remus said. "And apparently the manifestation made the most of her fears."

"Do you think we could fast forward to when it appears?" Lucy asked, her stomach churning as the children discussed their various options.

Remus did so, and once the shadow began to change and take on a defined human form, Cordelia gasped, "Remus, I'm sure I know him."

Given the circumstances, Remus could not help but wonder if his wife had made a mistake. "You're sure?"

"I think so," Cordelia said, her voice hesitant. "But I can't recall from where."

"Let's get out of here, and try to figure it out," Sirius suggested, deciding that he had seen enough.

The group's abrupt withdrawal from the pensieve caused a few questions, and so Cordelia explained what she believed. "I'm sure I know that boy who appeared, and I obviously wasn't there when he attacked Albus, so I don't know where I know him from."

Remus withdrew his wand. "Try and think of him for me."

Cordelia did as Remus asked, but when her memory was viewed, it was a copy of what she had just seen. "I don't understand. How can I know him but can't recall him?"

"You're probably getting him confused with someone else," Dae suggested.

Remus came up with another suggestion. "Or it could be that he looks like someone who maybe visited your former home."

"We did have a lot of tradesmen coming in and out all the time," Cordelia had to admit. "But it's impossible to recall any of their faces or the house."

"It has to be the Fidelius charm we think must be on the house. And if we're right about that, then it will be difficult for you to recall anyone you don't have a strong link with." Remus gave a case in point. "For example, I can remember meeting you that first time when I came to tell Justin about Harry, and I can recall what we said, but I can't recall the house or where I went, even though I know I had to have gone somewhere to meet you."

Cordelia gave Remus a gentle smile. "If you remember, that's where I said I was first attracted to you."

Remus smiled back at his wife. "I do remember that, but I bet you can't remember the house or exactly where we were when we talked."

Cordelia had to agree with him. "I can't, but I know for certain that I was at home."

Hermione was rather fascinated by this. "It seems so strange to think that you know you had a home and can't remember it but you can remember what happened in it."

Justin was in the same position as his mother. "It is weird. I can remember certain things, such as talking to Marissa, and I know she was always letting me take things from the kitchen. But no matter how hard I try, I can't remember the kitchen."

"Can I see how a memory looks?" Lucy asked, wondering how such a memory would play out if there was a Fidelius charm in place. She soon found out; the memory she took was blurry, and it was almost as if Cordelia and Justin were floating in fog in mid-air as they talked about a holiday they had taken.

"So I'm able to recall Justin when I believe we should have been at my home, and the same for Remus, but I have strong connections to both of them. If I have no strong connection to the boy I think I recognized, how do I know if I'm right or not about whether it's the same boy I saw in Harry's memory?" Cordelia asked in frustration.

"You need to relax. So sit down, close your eyes, and think about the boy; think about what he might have said; what he might have done," Sirius suggested, his voice gentle and coaxing.

Cordelia did as Sirius suggested, her brow furrowing. A few minutes passed, with everyone remaining silent while Cordelia concentrated. Suddenly her eyes flew open. "He came about a job, but I can't recall what job. And I know I took him into Marissa but I can't remember doing it."

"Can you recollect his name?" Remus asked in as a gentle a voice as Sirius had just used.

Cordelia again closed her eyes, her hand going out as if to greet someone. Once more her eyes flew open. "It was Tom. Tom... Tom..."

"Tom Riddle," Hermione helpfully offered up.

"It wasn't Riddle," Cordelia said, and she got to her feet, swearing, which was totally unlike her. "Damn it! I really can't remember."

"Let's look at your memory," Remus suggested. But unfortunately, because Cordelia could not entirely recollect the boy who had come about the job, the memory was even blurrier than the one of her and Justin had been, and the boy's features were wholly indistinct.

"So what do we do now?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Remus said, having run out of ideas. "I think we might just have to assume that Cordie is mixing up the boy who came about the job with the manifestation we saw."

"But I was so sure he looked familiar, and that it was that boy who came for a job," Cordelia protested.

Justin brought up a good point. "Mum, if he really had been another version of Voldemort, I doubt he'd have been knocking at our door looking for a job."

Cordelia's head drooped in defeat. "You're probably right."

Remus pulled his wife into his arms. "As you pointed out earlier, it's not been a good day, Cordie. You're tired, you've had to support me, take care of the children, and I think that watching Harry's memory was the proverbial straw."

Cordelia had to agree that it had been a bit much. "Do you think we could leave watching the rest of the memory until some other time?"

Remus nodded. "Unless anyone else wants to go back in now...?"

Sirius and Lucy both shook their heads, Lucy spinning around as Sirius' doorbell rang out. "It's a bit late for a caller, isn't it?"

"It might be Anna. I spotted her at the funeral today with her father and a woman I presume had to have been her mother," Sirius said, not being able to think of anyone else who would be calling. "I don't want to have to try and explain you lot, so perhaps you should apparate out of here, and I'll come by for breakfast."

Harry picked up the pensieve. "Goodnight, Sirius." He then vanished.

"Hermione, please apparate Hannah home," Remus ordered, before turning to Justin. "I'll take you and then come back for Cordie."

Cordelia took over from Remus as he vanished. "Luna, please apparate Dudley home." Luna grabbed onto Dudley and vanished with him without saying a word.

Dae held out his hand to Cordelia. "I can take you."

"I'll wait for Remus, but thank you," Cordelia said, not wanting to go with him.

Dae bowed his head slightly and vanished. Remus reappeared moments later. "Breakfast is at eight. Don't forget that Virginia Granger might have arrived by then." Then he vanished with Cordelia.

Only once the house was empty did Sirius open the front door to discover that his suspicion had been correct, and that it was Anna who had rung the doorbell. "Anna, it's after ten. Is everything alright?"

Anna gave a watery smile. "I'm sorry to bother you so late but I need some milk and the shop is closed. Do you have any?"

Sirius stood aside. "Come in, and I'll check. You were lucky to catch me; I was just about to go to bed."

This was the first time Anna had ever been into Sirius' apartment, and she followed him into the open and airy cream and brown decorated living area. "I was on my way back from the store, and I saw the lights on."

Sirius headed into the kitchen. "I thought the local store stayed open twenty four hours a day."

"There was a sign saying that due to an electrical problem, the shop would be closed all day, and I was too tired to start shopping around," Anna said, unable to tell Sirius that she could have apparated to her parents' home for some milk, but she had been afraid of her splicing herself because she felt so tired and upset.

Sirius opened his fridge. "I have a spare pint of semi-skimmed, if that's okay."

"That would be perfect," Anna said, wanting a decent cup of tea after the day she had had.

She looked around the apartment, her eyes alighting on the large wooden coffee table. "Did you have a party?"

Sirius only then remembered the numerous glasses littering the apartment. "You might say that."

Anna was glad that there were lots of glasses and not just two. Then, not wanting to overstay her welcome, she took the milk Sirius was holding out. "Thanks for this. After the day I've had I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't got any." Her voice cracked on the last word, and she burst into tears. "I'm so sorry. I had to attend a funeral today, and not being able to get milk was the last straw." With tears running down her face, Anna fished out a rather bedraggled handkerchief.

Leaving her alone for a moment, Sirius headed into his bathroom and got some tissues for her. "Here. That handkerchief looks as though it's seen better days."

Anna took several of them, and stemming her tears, she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "Thank you. I'm sorry about that." She gave a shaky laugh. "I shouldn't be this upset."

Sirius led Anna to sit down. "Funerals aren't the most pleasant of occasions, so I think you could be forgiven your tears."

"Thank you," Anna said, glad that Sirius was being so understanding.

"So what have you been up to since we let met?" Sirius asked, not wanting to dwell on the funeral.

"I've been in meetings most of the week," Anna said, also glad of the change in subject. "You?"

"At the hospital mostly, but I also took a few days off," Sirius responded.

It was then that Anna remembered what Sirius had told her when they had last bumped into each other. "You said you had had bad

news about a friend the last time we met. Is he or she any better now?"

"He passed on," Sirius said, before holding out a hand to indicate the glasses. "That's why I had people here earlier."

"I'm so sorry," Anna said, her tears beginning afresh. "I thought that Professor Dumbledore's passing was awful but at least he wasn't a close friend."

Sirius hated that he couldn't tell Anna the truth without revealing who he really was. "It doesn't matter how close someone is, it's still hard to lose anyone."

Anna started to cry even harder, and she got to her feet. "I'm sorry, Simon. This is the last thing you need. I shouldn't have bothered you. I'd better go."

Sirius stood in her way as she attempted to leave. "I can't let you leave while you're this upset."

Anna let Sirius take the milk from her hand and hold her against him. "I feel so silly. Professor Dumbledore was just my former Headmaster but it still hurts."

Sirius was hard pushed to hold back his own tears as he comforted the distraught girl. "I'm sure he'd have been touched that you feel like this."

Anna buried her face deeper into Sirius' shoulder as she wept, the strain of the day getting to her. When she finally looked up, she could see that Sirius also had wet eyes. "I'm being so selfish. You've lost somebody too."

"It's okay," Sirius said, wiping his eyes. "I knew that one day he'd die. I mean, no-one lives forever, do they?"

"I always imagined that Professor Dumbledore would," Anna said, her voice catching. "Or that he'd die a different death from the one he did."

Sirius so badly wanted to tell her that Albus had but he could not risk compromising his friends. "We can't always choose how we want to go."

Anna took several deep breaths, and dabbed at her eyes yet again. "I know, but he was so..." Anna suddenly found herself lost as to how to explain Albus to someone she believed was a Muggle, and so she changed what she had been about to say. "It's just..." Her change of subject was moot as she started to cry again.

Sirius again felt obliged to hold her, and this time he could not hold back some of his own tears. When Anna pulled away she apologized to Sirius. "I'm so sorry. I only came around for some milk, and you must think I'm terrible crying all over you like this."

Sirius pointed to his damp face. "That would be the pot calling the kettle black."

Anna now felt even worse about not thinking about Sirius' loss. "I'm really sorry, Simon. Would you like to talk about it?"

Sirius shook his head. "Thanks, but if you don't mind, I'd rather not."

Anna was in some respects glad, as although she had made the offer, she was aware that talking about yet another death would probably start her off crying again. So, after taking yet another deep breath, she picked the milk up again. "Then I'd better let you head off to bed. Thank you yet again for this. I'll get a replacement for you tomorrow."

"So you're not returning to New York tomorrow?" Sirius asked, after telling her not to bother replacing the milk, and then heading to the front door with her.

"Dad postponed the rest of the trip," Anna told him. "So I'm not due back there for another week."

"At least it will give you time to get over this then before you have to return to work," Sirius said as he opened the door.

Anna hesitated in the doorway. "Seeing as I'm not going back, would you like to go out to dinner one night next week?"

"I can't," Sirius said. "I'm on duty all week."

Anna was a little disappointed, and she wondered if her tears had put Sirius off her. But since she could hardly ask him, she plastered on a smile. "Thanks again for the milk, and goodnight."

Sirius returned the sentiment. "Goodnight, Anna." Then after watching her head to the stairwell, and out of the door, he gave a long sigh and closed the door.

Next Chapter: Harry and his friends get their OWL results; Harry makes a stand; Remus struggles with his return to Hogwarts.

Chapter 60: An Ordinary Boy

24th July 1996

A tired Sirius joined Hermione, Cordelia, Dae, and Remus for breakfast at seven, everyone else still in bed. "I'm out of pepper-up. Do you have any?"

Hermione jumped up from the breakfast table. "I'll fetch it."

While she hurried off to the potions room in the basement, Sirius told those left in the room that he would actually be around during the week. "Just so you know, if you want to get together for anything, I won't be going to New York next week. Anna is staying here in the UK for a while."

"So that was her at the door last night?" Cordelia asked.

Sirius nodded, and yawned. "Yeah."

Dae smirked at Sirius. "Long night?"

Sirius knew what Dae was thinking. "You, my friend, have a mind worthy of being in the gutter, and the answer is no. She simply needed a pint of milk."

Dae pulled a face of disbelief. "She could have apparated to get that."

"I think she was too upset," Sirius said, guessing correctly. "She broke down and cried about Albus."

Remus could feel Sirius' churning emotions. "You're feeling guilty aren't you?"

"Yes," Sirius said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm finding lying to her to be a little much."

"Then come clean," Dae suggested.

Sirius shook his head. "I can't. Even though I really like her, I barely know her, and I'm not about to drop you and everyone else in it."

"But you could obliviate her if it doesn't go to plan," Remus pointed out.

Sirius was well aware of Remus' past failed attempt to tell a former girlfriend about his being a werewolf, and the pain it had caused Remus when he had had to obliviate her before calling things off without being able to tell his girlfriend the truth why. "I can't do that to Anna, Remus. It's bad enough that I'm lying to her about who I am without robbing her of her memories and then dumping her."

"So when do you plan on telling her?" Dae asked.

Sirius sat silently for a moment before answering. "I don't know if I will. As much as I don't want to, I'm thinking it might be better just to call things off now."

Cordelia made a suggestion. "Sirius, I don't think now is the right time to decide what to do, so put it off. You've had a tough week, you're tired, and not thinking straight."

"But if you need to talk, you can come to Hogwarts with me," Remus offered, able to tell that his friend was feeling very conflicted. "I need to make a start on the various letters that need to go out to the students, but we can talk while I do that."

Sirius shook his head. "I just need to get some sleep, and then I'll decide what to do."

Hermione chose that moment to come back in and she handed the potion over to Sirius. "Here you go."

Sirius knocked it back in one swig, steam coming out of his ears, and he shook himself. "That feels better." He then poured himself a mug of tea, and feeling reinvigorated, he changed his mind. "Actually, Remus, I think I will go with you. Do you have any polyjuice?"

"You won't need it," Remus said. "We can apparate directly into my private quarters; headmaster's privilege."

Sirius smiled happily. "Thank goodness. I hate the taste of the stuff."

Remus stood up. "You'd better make yourself a plate up. I'd like to get started sooner rather than later. As my lovely wife pointed out to me yesterday, I'm a procrastinator."

"I'd agree with her one hundred percent," Sirius said, sharing a smile with Cordelia. Then, after piling up a plate, and putting another one on top to hold the contents in, Sirius announced, "I'm ready."

Dae also got up. "Thank you for breakfast but I too should be on my way to work." After shaking hands with Remus and Sirius, he nodded politely at Cordelia and Hermione, before vanishing.

Hermione stopped Remus from following in Dae's footsteps by calling out to him. "Remus, please wait a minute. When will we get our results?"

"I'm dealing with the NEWT results letters today," Remus said, watching Hermione's face fall. "Tomorrow I need to start on getting the standard letters for the students prepared, and so it will probably be the day afterwards, or, dependent upon when the teachers get back to me with their reading lists, it might be even later than that."

Although she was disappointed, Hermione was aware that Remus had a great deal of work to do, and so she made an offer. "If you need help, I'll go with you."

"Thank you, but not today," Remus said, wanting to be able to talk openly with Sirius. "But if you want to come in with me for the next few days after that, then I'd be grateful for your help."

Hermione visibly brightened. "Then I'll be up early again tomorrow."

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Cordelia asked.

Hermione frowned. "What?"

"Your mother is coming today," Cordelia reminded her.

"I'll see her all day today, and she said she's going shopping tomorrow," Hermione responded, shuddering at the thought of having to spend an entire day traipsing around the London stores with Virginia. "And I'll see her in the evenings."

"Just don't neglect her after she's making the effort to come here to see you," Cordelia warned Hermione. "Remus can quite easily cope without you."

Remus disagreed with his wife's statement, Frank Longbottom still being locked into his contract with BritAD until the end of August. "That might have been true if Frank had been able to help me, but he can't and so I'm willing to accept any help I can get." But just like Cordelia he too was concerned about Hermione neglecting her mother, and so he added a caveat. "However, I don't want you helping if it's going to interfere with the time you're supposed to be spending with Virginia."

"I'm sure Mummy will understand," Hermione said, ignoring her conscience in favor of a chance of getting a look at her OWLs scores early. "And it's only going to be for a few days."

"Then just make sure you're ready for six in the morning," Remus warned Hermione, before turning to Cordelia. "I might be late home."

Cordelia had a sneaking suspicion that Remus' lateness would have more to do with spending some time in a drinking establishment of some sort with Sirius, rather than because he had things to do at Hogwarts. "What happened to the man who had far too much to do and therefore needs to steal Hermione away?"

"His best friend needs to talk to him," Remus said. "And it's not as if I'm not going to be working while we do it."

"Don't play the innocent with me, Remus Lupin," Cordelia said, before kissing him as he leant over towards her.

"What on earth do you mean?" Remus asked innocently as he straightened up.

Cordelia pursed her lips, although she was having to fight hard not to smile. "You know exactly what I mean!" She got to her feet. "And I'd say don't come crying to me when you have a hangover, but with your metabolism I know I'd be wasting my time."

Remus grinned at Cordelia, unsurprised that his wife had caught on so quickly to his intentions, and he turned her attention towards Sirius. "You could warn Sirius but I doubt he'd listen."

Sirius went to protest, and then he shook his head. "I can't argue with that."

Cordelia kissed Sirius' cheek. "Take care of him."

"I think it's going to be the other way around," Sirius said, kissing Cordelia back. "And..."

Remus cut Sirius off. "Come on. We haven't got time to chat. We've got work to do."

Sirius ignored Remus in favor of addressing Hermione. "I hope you know what you're letting yourself in for by offering to help."

Hermione grinned at Sirius. "I can't wait."

Sirius shook his head sadly. "I'm not sure I can go with you, Remus. I think Hermione has taken leave of her senses and needs a doctor."

Remus slapped his friend up the back of the head. "And Cordelia calls me a procrastinator. Come on."

After winking at Hermione, Sirius took Remus' arm and the two of them vanished.

Three Days Later

Remus handed Hermione a sheet of parchment, a smile on his face. "Even though I'm not sending everyone else's letters out until tomorrow, I thought I'd let you have this early as a reward for all of your hard work."

Hermione all but ripped the sheet of parchment out of Remus' fingers, her eyes quickly scanning the page. "I passed! I got Outstandings in everything!"

"I didn't expect any less of you," Remus said, and he hugged the excited girl. "I'm going to take everyone out to dinner tonight to celebrate."

"How did everyone else do then?" Hermione asked, Remus having kept the OWL scores out of her hands in favor of her sorting out mailing lists.

"They'll tell you when they get their results tomorrow," Remus said.

Hermione looked hopefully at Remus. "Couldn't you let Harry and Justin have their results early as well?"

Remus smiled and pulled two sheets of folded parchment out of his pocket. "I thought you might say that."

Hermione had to resist the temptation to snatch the sheets away from Remus. "Then can we go now?"

In response, Remus held out his arm. "Come on then."

Potter Place

Before Harry could groan at an awful joke Dudley had just told, a knock sounded at the door and Cordelia turned around. "I think that might be Simon. Remus said he was going to invite him to dinner tonight."

It was, and Virginia was subsequently introduced to Sirius, who had decided to keep his identity hidden, having enough on his plate already without having to go through the same rigmarole with Virginia as he had done with Dudley. "So you're a Muggle doctor and not a healer?"

"That's correct. I work at St. Bart's," Sirius said, telling a half-truth.

Virginia took this to mean that Sirius was actually a Muggle. "It's so nice not to be the only Muggle around here, Dr. White. So how do you know everyone?"

"I met Cordelia a while ago," Sirius said, again not exactly lying, but not telling the whole truth either. "And please call me Simon."

Virginia then turned to face Dae, who had turned up at the front door moments after Sirius had arrived, and she ended up frowning. "I'm sure I know you."

Dae knew that she knew him; her silvery blonde hair was unmistakable, and he therefore acknowledged she was correct. "You do. I believe you were in my French class at Oxford. Virginia Strang, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it's Virginia Granger now." Virginia frowned again as she tried to recollect Dae's name. "I'm sorry, I can't recall your name."

"It's Dae Venant," Dae said, shaking hands.

"Are you a Muggle as well?" Virginia asked, unsure of Dae's status, particularly as he had been at a Muggle university with her. "I notice you didn't apparate in."

"My office is just around the corner and I decided to walk here," Dae explained. "But I am a wizard."

"But you were taking Muggle language classes at University," Virginia observed.

Dae corrected her. "Two of my language classes were Muggle based but not Latin, which was offered by the magical section of the University. That's how I met Remus. He was taking Latin, Russian, and German, and I was taking Latin, Spanish, and French, but I dropped the Spanish and French to pursue a different line of study."

"So can I take it then that you're not a teacher?" Virginia asked, Dae's comment about his office making her think he had a different profession from Remus.

Dae shook his head. "No, I'm a wizarding lawyer."

Even though she wanted to listen in on the conversation between Virginia and Dae, Lucy still needed to shower and change before they left to go out to dinner, her clothes covered in paint from the house she was renovating, which was why she was currently staying at Potter Place. She therefore reluctantly excused herself. "I'm just going to get changed."

Remus and Hermione apparated into the hallway just as Lucy came out. "Is everyone here?"

"They're in the family room," Lucy confirmed to Remus. "I need to change though before we go out as I've been painting in these clothes." She turned in surprise as Dae came up behind her. "Do you want me, Hermione, or Remus?"

Dae smiled at Remus and Hermione, before confirming he needed neither of them. "You. I wanted to see if you were going to come back to my place tonight."

Lucy went to say no, and then changed her mind. "Yes." Then she excused herself yet again, and headed upstairs.

Once inside the family room, Remus revealed he had OWLS result for Harry and Justin. Both boys were as anxious as Hermione to discover their scores and they too literally grabbed their sheets of parchment from Remus the moment he withdrew them from his pocket.

Hermione watched Harry sag visibly as he looked over his results, and she immediately became anxious. "Harry, how did you do?"

Harry handed over his sheet. "Here, you can take a look at it."

Hermione looked down at the sheet which laid out the results.

Ancient Runes: A
Arithmancy: E
Astronomy: A
Charms: O
Defense Against the Dark Arts: O
Herbology: E
History of Magic: E
Potions: O
Transfiguration: E

"You did really well, Harry," Hermione said encouragingly. Then she turned to Justin. "How did you do?"

"I'll show you in a minute," Justin said, first handing his sheet to Cordelia. "Here, Mum."

Cordelia took the sheet from Justin, her face taking on a look of delight. "You did wonderfully."

Harry, who had taken his sheet back from Hermione, also passed it on to Cordelia. "I don't know if you want to see this or not."

Cordelia took the sheet. "Of course I want to see it, Harry." After looking over his results, she handed the sheet back to Harry, her face wearing the same delighted look it had for Justin. "You also did wonderfully, Harry."

Rather disappointed that Hermione had not done the same with her, Virginia looked pointedly at her daughter. "So, are you going to share your results?"

Hermione did not bother handing over her sheet of parchment. "I got Outstandings in everything."

"Congratulations," Virginia said, although she felt a little put out that Hermione had chosen to converse with Harry before revealing her results.

Harry meanwhile was passing his sheet of results to Luna, who was hopping from one foot to the other. "Here you go."

Luna gave a squeal of delight as she looked at it, Dudley leaning over her shoulder. "Harry, that's brilliant, and you thought you would do terribly in potions."

"It came as shock that I did that well," Harry said, although it was obvious that he was rather proud of his score.

Remus gave Harry a warning. "Just remember that you're going to have to work harder this coming year, particularly where Severus is concerned if you take his class."

Harry pulled a face. "No matter how hard I work, he still won't give me the marks I deserve."

"If that happens, then you come to me," Remus said. "And just as Albus did for you, I'll arrange for Severus to teach you and to have your work marked elsewhere."

Sirius grinned at Harry. "Just tell Remus he's doing that, even if he isn't."

"Simon!" Remus growled at his friend, just about remembering not to call him Sirius while Virginia was there. "Don't encourage him to hate Severus more than he already does."

"Why not?" Sirius asked. "You can't exactly say that you like him either."

Remus was more than a little annoyed with Sirius for pointing it out. "My personal feelings about Severus are not what are being discussed here."

"Just admit you hate him," Sirius said, not letting Remus back out of admitting to the truth.

Remus scowled at Sirius. "Okay, he's not exactly my favorite person but at the end of the day he's still a member of my staff, and unless he actually does something wrong, I don't want you encouraging Harry to rebel against him."

"He wouldn't have to do that," Harry said, defending his godfather. "I hate Snape, and I still think he had something to do with what happened to Professor Dumbledore."

Virginia interrupted. "How could Professor Snape have had something to do with the Headmaster's heart attack?"

Hermione threw a look of exasperation at Harry for letting the cat out of the bag, before explaining briefly. "It wasn't an accident, Mummy. That was a cover story put out by Amelia Bones, head of BritAD. Professor Dumbledore was attacked by a magical relic, and Harry believes that Professor Snape had something to do with it."

Virginia turned to look at Remus. "And did he?"

Remus shook his head. "No. Severus was questioned by Amelia Bones, and he swore an oath to say that he had nothing to do with what happened. And therefore as far as I am concerned, he's clean."

Even though he knew he was about to rock the boat, Dae still offered up his own opinion. "Or he wants us to think he is. As a

lawyer, I've seen clients manage to wriggle out of genuine oaths. Perhaps Snape has as well."

Remus frowned, feeling dislike coming from Dae. "Anyone would think you hate him."

"After meeting the man, I'd say he's not at the top of my Christmas list," Dae said sarcastically, before softening his voice a little. "I know he looks clean but I also think you should be wary of him, Remus."

"I think we're putting two and two together and getting six," Cordelia said, siding with her husband. "While Severus isn't the nicest person I know, it doesn't mean that he's done something wrong."

Hermione was aware that Harry would not like her answer as she too sided with Remus. "All the books say that you can't get around oaths. I'm with Remus."

Harry grimaced at his girlfriend. "Books aren't always right, Hermione, and, like Dae just said, I think you can get around them."

Justin, Dudley, and Luna all subsequently agreed with Harry, even though Dudley had no idea if it was true or not. As much as he respected Remus and loved Cordelia, Dudley felt that he owed his loyalty to Harry for supporting him, especially after how his parents had treated Harry, and Dudley therefore had chosen to side with his cousin.

Virginia was the last person to put her opinion forward. "Like Simon, I'm a Muggle, and maybe not qualified to offer up an opinion, not having the same sort of contact the rest of you do with the man. But after meeting Professor Snape that day when Lester was killed, I have to say that he's completely odious, and he makes my skin crawl."

Hermione was rather startled to hear this. "You've never said before."

"Nobody asked," Virginia said, and then she went on to surprise her daughter further. "And I think Harry might be right; you can't always trust in books, Hermione. Sometimes you need to rely on instinct alone."

"And my instincts tell me that Snape can't be trusted," Harry added after Virginia had finished speaking.

"But..." Hermione went to argue.

Remus, however, interrupted her. "Hermione, you don't have to defend your opinion. We obviously all have differing ones, but after listening to you all, I agree that maybe I should be more cautious. So, even though I really believe Severus had nothing to do with what happened to Albus, I'll keep an eye on him nevertheless."

Cordelia decided that it was time for a change in subject. "I think we've talked about Severus Snape for long enough." She smiled at Luna. "Would you like to see Justin's results now?"

Glad that the uncomfortable discussion was now over, Luna held out her hand. "Please."

Cordelia handed over Justin's sheet to Luna. "They're actually almost identical to Harry's."

Comparing the two, Luna agreed. "Except Justin got an E in Defense and an O in Transfiguration."

Justin glanced over at Remus. "How did Hannah do?"

"I'll be sending out her results tomorrow, but I will say that she passed everything," Remus said, not wanting Justin to worry about Hannah's results.

Satisfied with Remus' answer, Justin moved onto what he now wanted to know. "So what courses are you going to take, Harry?"

"I have to take potions if I want to become an Auror," Harry said, pulling a face at the thought of continuing classes with Severus, "as well as DADA, Transfiguration, Charms, and Herbology. I'm probably also going to take Arithmancy, but drop Runes."

"I'm going to take the same as you," Justin immediately said, wanting to follow the same career path as Harry. "How about you, Hermione?"

"I'm taking Runes, Arithmancy, Charms, Transfiguration, DADA, Potions, and History of Magic," Hermione reeled off her choices. "And maybe Herbology, but I haven't decided yet. I almost wore myself out trying to do every course I could before, and if I overload myself, I won't have any time to myself or to spend with Harry."

"I feel the same way," Harry had to admit. "But with my prefect duties, and Justin asking me to be vice captain again, I think I'm going to be rather busy anyway."

Justin grinned at his friend. "You're going to be really busy. We are going to win the Quidditch cup for Hufflepuff, which means that we're going to be practicing as often as we can."

As Harry responded, Remus' keen hearing caught the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs, and he excused himself to go and speak to Lucy.

Lucy was not surprised to see Remus was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. "This is about me and Dae, isn't it?"

Remus nodded. "I couldn't help but overhear you say you were going to his house tonight. After our last talk, I just wanted to make sure that everything is okay."

"It will be after tonight," Lucy said. "I'm going to tell him that I can't keep doing this."

Remus turned as he heard Cordelia call out that they were all ready to go out to dinner. "We're coming." He turned back to Lucy. "We can't talk now, but I'm going to be up late tonight working on the timetables, so if you do need to talk to me, come into the study."

Lucy kissed Remus' cheek. "I will, and I think we had better get going. That sounds like Dudley complaining about being hungry."

"Dudley is always hungry," Remus said, but nevertheless he held out his arm and escorted Lucy back into the family room where everyone was waiting for them.

Later that evening

Lucy headed back to Dae's place with him and, after taking a glass of wine from French, she sat down, and talked about what had happened when Dae had first arrived at Potter Place. "I was surprised to discover that you knew Virginia at University."

"She obviously wasn't called Virginia Granger then, and that's why I never made the connection before now," Dae said.

"You don't like her much though, do you?" Lucy asked, now knowing Dae well enough to be able to determine his moods. "Even though you were polite at first, you barely spoke to her at dinner."

Dae shook his head. "I hoped she'd improved since University, but she hasn't. She's still overbearing, opinionated, and more than a little bossy."

Lucy took a sip of her crisp white wine before responding. "Given that she couldn't remember your name, I didn't realize you knew her that well at University."

"I didn't," Dae said. "Her reputation went before her."

This caught Lucy's attention. "Are you going to share?"

"All the blokes knew her, even the magical..." Dae began.

Lucy interrupted him. "You mean she slept around?"

"Quite the opposite. Her nickname was the Ice Princess," Dae revealed. "The in-joke between us wizards was that she was so frigid that even Fiendfyre couldn't melt the ice from around her..."

Lucy hurriedly cut Dae off. "I get it."

Dae grinned and shifted closer to Lucy. "I certainly can't say the same about you."

This gave Lucy the opportunity she had been looking for. "Which brings me to why I'm here. Dae, I think we should end things between us."

Dae merely smiled, having already heard this on more than one occasion from Lucy. "Really?"

Lucy stood firm. "Yes, Dae, really."

Dae shrugged. "Okay, then."

Lucy was at first a little shocked at his blasé attitude but then she realized that he didn't believe her. "I'm being serious, Dae."

"Of course you are, Lucy," Dae said condescendingly. "We both know you won't really end it."

"Goodbye, Dae," Lucy said abruptly, putting down her glass of wine, getting to her feet, and vanishing.

"You'll be back," Dae said, a little mockingly, and then he made his way to his study to catch up on some paperwork he had.

Potter Place

As promised, Remus was in his study and an exasperated Lucy made her way there. Remus could feel how frustrated she was. "What's wrong?"

Lucy dropped onto a chair. "He didn't believe me."

Remus was aware of how many times Lucy had said she was going to end things, and so he was not entirely surprised. "You can't blame him."

"But I really meant it this time," Lucy protested.

Remus was well aware of that. "I know that, and Dae will eventually get the message when you stop going around."

Lucy sighed. "I hope so."

"You're feeling regret," Remus noted.

"I'm going to miss the sex," Lucy admitted freely, totally unembarrassed by her comment. She sighed. "It was pretty amazing."

Remus had heard Lucy's opinion of Dae's capabilities before. "You'll find someone else like that; someone who doesn't make you feel like shit afterwards."

Lucy straightened up. "That's what I'm hoping for." She grinned at him. "If Sirius doesn't work out with Anna I might try him out next."

Remus knew she was only joking, but went along with it anyway. "You could, but I can safely say I have no idea if he's good in bed or not."

"And here I was thinking that all English schoolboys tested their sexuality out at school," Lucy remarked, smiling even more.

"We did," Remus said. "But in both Sirius' and my own cases, it was with girls."

Lucy found herself wondering if she had upset Remus with her gentle ribbing. "I was just teasing."

"I know," Remus said, smiling at her. "But to make up for your impudence, you can help me with these timetables."

Sighing, Lucy shifted her chair and joined Remus around the other side of the table, and a short time later little could be heard from either of them except for murmurs about what classes should be placed where.

1st August 1996

Harry headed downstairs to find Cordelia sitting up, a cup of tea in her hands as she sat at the dinner table looking out at the full moon. "You missing Remus, aren't you?"

Cordelia stood up and grabbed a mug before answering. "Yes. And it's really silly seeing as it's only been six hours since he left for the night, but I can't help worrying."

Harry took the mug and poured some tea out of the pot into it. "He'll be okay. He always is."

"But I still worry that this time something might go wrong," Cordelia said, sighing, before she realized that something must be bothering Harry for him to be up and about after midnight. "Now we've

discussed what's bothering me, are you going to tell me why you're not in bed? It's rather late for you to be roaming around."

"I've been lying in bed thinking, and I've decided that I'm going to cancel my week at BritAD," Harry said, his tone firm as he was expecting an argument from Cordelia about it.

Having seen Harry's memory of Amelia trying to coerce Harry into killing Albus, and having been rather angry about it, Cordelia surprised him with her vehement response of "Good!"

The wind was taken out of Harry's sails somewhat by Cordelia's easy acceptance of his decision. "I thought you'd be angry. With everyone else gone, this is supposed to be when you and Remus have some time to yourself." Almost everyone else had left that morning to visit relatives: Hermione had gone to Nice with her mother; Luna to stay with her cousins in Ireland; Dudley to stay with his Aunt Marge; and Justin to stay with Hannah's family.

"You're forgetting that Lucy is here all week," Cordelia reminded Harry.

"But she's mostly going to be supervising the renovation of that house she's bought," Harry said. "So really it will only be me here, and I don't want to get in the way."

"Harry, you won't be in the way. Remus still has a lot to do at Hogwarts, and so we won't be spending quite as much time together as I'd like. But if Remus and I do want a little time to ourselves, then we'll go somewhere," Cordelia assured him. "You're sixteen now, and I think that you're more than capable of being left on your own for a few hours."

Harry pulled a face. "Look at what happened the last time that happened."

Cordelia had to admit at one time she would have been worried, but after viewing the entirety of Harry's memory of Albus' death, she actually felt comfortable about leaving him alone; in her eyes, Harry's handling of the event had been mature and well thought out. "But you dealt really well with the situation, Harry, and this time we would make sure that we tell you exactly where we're going in case you do need us in an emergency."

"So you really don't mind if I don't go to BritAD and I stay here during the day instead?" Harry asked.

Cordelia shook her head. "Of course not, but do you mind if I ask why you changed your mind?"

"I'm still a little angry at Amelia," Harry admitted. "When I went in to BritAD to make a statement about what happened to Professor Dumbledore, she really gave me quite a stern lecture about how I should have killed him and fulfilled my duty."

"Harry, I'm glad you didn't," Cordelia said, her former anger at Amelia reigniting. "No child should have to bear such a responsibility like that, not even one who is supposed to kill Voldemort. She had no right to take you to task over it."

Harry could see that Cordelia was not pleased at the news. "I probably shouldn't have told you."

"Harry, I know we're only your guardians and not your parents but I think it's important you tell me or Remus these things," Cordelia said.

"Are you mad?" Harry asked, a little nervously.

"Not at you," Cordelia said, her voice making it clear though that she was angry. "That woman had no right to talk to you like that, and I'm not going to stand for it."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "What are you going to do?"

Cordelia could see that Harry was not entirely at ease with what he had obviously guessed she had planned but she was not backing down. "I'm going to see her. No-one does that to any of my family and gets away with it."

"I still want to tell her myself that I'm not going to go next week," Harry said immediately, not wanting to let Cordelia do his dirty work, although he suspected she would have done so with pleasure. "And why."

"Then I'll come with you while you do, and I'll speak to her afterwards," Cordelia said. "In fact, after I've checked that Remus is alright in the morning, we'll go and speak to her then."

The Next Day

Amelia got to her feet as Harry and Cordelia were led into her office. "Mrs. Lupin, good morning. Harry, I wasn't expecting to see you until Monday."

Harry stepped forward. "I've come to tell you that I won't be coming next week."

Amelia frowned. "But you need training on wards. After what happened at Potter Place, it's obvious that it's a gap in your education that I believe needs filling."

"I'm still not coming here," Harry said steadfastly. "I want to spend what's left of my holidays enjoying them, and not having to think about what might be around the corner."

"Harry, you have a duty..." Amelia began.

Cordelia placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and interrupted Amelia. "Madam Bones, he has nothing of the sort. Harry is just an ordinary boy who needs to be allowed to live like one."

"But he's not an ordinary boy," Amelia argued, time and circumstances having changed her opinion about Harry's chances of being allowed to live a normal life. "Harry is not only destined to kill You-Know-Who but he's also a Horcrux. I therefore want him to come in next week. Not only can I deal with the knowledge that he's lacking, but he can also be examined by..."

Cordelia's face tightened. "I don't care if it was discovered that he was Merlin reincarnate, under no circumstances is Harry being examined by anyone. And as from now, he'll be having absolutely nothing to do with this place."

Amelia downshifted and tried placating Cordelia. "Mrs. Lupin, please try to understand..."

"But I do understand," Cordelia said, aware of what Amelia was trying to do. "You want Harry to be trained like a good little soldier, and you're hoping that if you make him feel obliged enough, he'll sacrifice himself to take out Voldemort."

Amelia repressed the shudder that threatened at the use of Voldemort's name. "I care about Harry, just as much as you do."

Cordelia disagreed. "If you did, you would never have told him that he should have been responsible for killing Albus." When Amelia opened her mouth to respond, Cordelia held up a hand. "I haven't finished yet." Amelia's mouth shut and Cordelia continued. "Tell me, Madam Bones, would you put your niece in the same position as Harry was in?"

"No, but she's not the Boy Who Lived, and she isn't destined to kill You-Know-Who," Amelia said.

"But if she was, how would you feel if I'd told her that she should have killed someone?" Cordelia asked.

"I'd tell that she should have done it," Amelia said in a resolute voice. "That it was her responsibility."

Cordelia shook her head in dismay. "I would never ask anyone I loved to do something like that."

Amelia started to get angry at Cordelia. "You think I don't understand love? Believe me when I say I do. I sacrificed nearly all of my family rather than give in to You-Know-Who."

"That's not love, that's your sense of duty," Cordelia retorted, aware of the circumstances surrounding most of the Bones' family's deaths from Remus. "I'm talking about the sort of love that Harry's mother demonstrated when she gave up her life in order to try to save her children."

"It didn't save Harry's brother," Amelia pointed out.

Cordelia went to respond, only for Harry to place a hand on Cordelia's arm and take up the mantle. "But she still did it. No-one said she had to do it or that it was expected of her. But my Mum still tried to save both me and my brother."

"And it's because of her doing so that you're now the one who is expected to make sacrifices for the greater good," Amelia said to Harry. "Sacrifices such as giving up some of your time in order to learn what you must in order to take on You-Know-Who."

"And I have done that up until now," Harry quite rightly said. Then he shook his head. "But not this time. I want to do normal things, like everyone else does during their holidays."

"But you're not a normal boy," Amelia pointed out yet again.

"But this summer I'm going to be," Harry said, determined not to be swayed by anything Amelia might say to him. "Just for once I want to forget that I'm a Horcrux and what I'm destined to do. And most of all I'd like to forget about Voldemort."

"But what happened to Albus proves that you can't," Amelia argued. "Particularly as his death has to have been something to do with You-Know-Who."

"And if it was, what could I do about it?" Harry asked. "I know I'm more powerful than most wizards, but Voldemort would still walk all over me."

"Which is why it's important that you come in next week," Amelia said. "You aren't prepared to take him on."

"No-one is," Harry contended. "That's why everyone was so afraid of him, and still is."

"Harry, you're the only one who is supposed to be able to defeat him," Amelia said, her tone revealing her exasperation with Harry.

"I know that," Harry said calmly. "And I therefore think that I should be the one who gets to decide what I do and not everyone else, not even you."

Amelia knew then what this was about. "You're angry with me about what I said to you about Albus, aren't you?"

Harry immediately nodded. "Yes. I don't think you were fair in expecting me to kill him." Harry then repeated what he had said to

her at Potter Place. "I'm not an Auror, and I'm not ready to be one. And, after everything that's happened, I'm not sure I ever want to be one."

Amelia realized then that she risked alienating Harry by being so forceful, and she became a little more placatory but still sticking to her viewpoint. "I apologize if you think I came down too hard on you, but I still believe you should have been the one to kill Albus."

"Well, I don't," Harry said. "And I'm not going to change my mind about that or next week."

Not wanting to push him totally away, Amelia had little choice except to accept Harry's answer. "Very well. I can't force you to come here, even though I think it's in your best interests, but I still want you to consider submitting an application to join the Auror program when you leave school. You were top of your year in Defense, Harry, to say nothing of how well you've done here, and it would be a pity to see that go to waste."

"I'll think about it," Harry said, not about to tell Amelia that he still had every intention of applying.

Amelia gave it one last try. "Harry, you still have your clearance, and should you do have a change of heart, you'll be more than welcome here."

"That might be so, but under the circumstances, I'm afraid that I can't allow it," Cordelia said, before Harry could respond. "You've already more or less said that Harry is going to be a lab rat now that you know he's a Horcrux. And as his guardian, there is absolutely no way that I am going to let you or anyone else touch him."

Taking in the fierce look on Cordelia's face, Amelia made an observation. "Anyone would think that Harry was your son rather than your ward."

Cordelia put her arms around Harry's neck and drew him back against her. "As far as I am concerned, Harry might as well be my son, and just as his mother did, if I think he needs defending, then I'll do it, no matter who it is I have to defend him against, and what it costs me."

Amelia knew that this speech was directed against her, and not Voldemort. But still hoping that she might be able to turn things around, Amelia took out her wand. "I swear on my magic that I will tell no-one of Harry's condition, and I will also not subject him to any examination that you do not give permission for."

It was Harry, however, and not Cordelia who responded to Amelia's oath. "Thank you, but as Aunt Cordie said, I'm still not coming next week."

"Then I hope everything goes well between now and your return to school," Amelia said, aware that nothing she said or did would change Harry's mind, and she was unwilling to totally alienate him. "And if you do need anything, please let me know."

"Thank you," Harry said politely, and as Cordelia released him, they both turned and left, Cordelia and Amelia exchanging brief nods.

Potter Place

Once they had apparated home, Harry turned and hugged Cordelia. "Thank you for coming with me and supporting me."

"I don't actually think you needed my support," Cordelia said, holding Harry against her. "You did a great job of standing up for yourself."

"It felt really good," Harry admitted. "But I'm still glad you came with me."

Cordelia gave Harry one last hug before letting him go. "Before you run off, I wanted to ask you something. Just now you called me Aunt Cordie. Is that something you'd like to continue doing?"

Harry went red and nodded. "If I can."

"I would love for you to call me that," Cordelia said, up until then Harry having been the only one of the children, except for Justin, who did not.

Then, in complete contrast to his bold demeanor in Amelia's office, Harry gave Cordelia a shy smile, before asking her a question. "Did you really mean what you said in Amelia's office, that you consider me to be like your son?"

Cordelia cupped Harry's cheek. "Yes, and not only that, I would defend you no matter what, even if meant taking on Voldemort himself."

"She's telling the truth, Harry," Remus' tired voice came from behind them. "I know you find it hard to believe, but Cordie's being honest."

Aware that Remus had been able to detect his disbelief, Harry's bottom lip quivered at his guardian's confirmation. "I thought you were just saying it to prove a point with Amelia."

Cordelia shook her head and pulled Harry into yet another hug. "Harry, I love you just as much as I love Justin. And if I had the opportunity I would not only be your guardian, but your mother as well."

Harry buried his face in Cordelia's shoulder and shuddered. "I think I might like that."

Remus then ruined the tender moment by yawning loudly, both Harry and Cordelia turning to look at him. "Sorry, I'm still tired."

"Perhaps you should go and lie back down," Cordelia suggested as she released Harry.

Remus shook his head and came up with an proposal. "Instead of me lying alone in bed, I think we should all do something together today."

"But you're exhausted," Harry protested, although he was rather taken by the idea.

"As Sirius always says, that's what pepper-up is for." Remus ruffled Harry's hair. "I'll go get some and get dressed."

Remus joined them a short time later, and revealed what he had planned. "So, after thinking about it, I've decided that we should go to Blackpool, eat fish and chips, you two should ride on the donkeys, and I want to go to the fair."

"You mean you want to ride the Big One?" Cordelia asked, aware of what she personally considered to be her husband's strange love of rollercoasters.

"Exactly," Remus said, and he smiled at Harry. "What do you think?"

Harry grinned at Remus. "I think that's a brilliant idea."

"And if you like," Remus offered, "I could make a few pit stops, and collect the rest of our family for the day."

"But they only went last night," Harry said.

Remus shrugged. "That's what apparating is for, and I expect both Dudley and Luna will be glad to return so soon, even if it is just for one day."

Even though he was already missing his girlfriend, Harry made a suggestion. "Maybe we shouldn't get Hermione though. I don't think her mother would be very happy if we interrupted their time together, especially as she didn't get to see Hermione very much last week."

Hermione had ended up going into Hogwarts with Remus almost every day of the entirety of Virginia's stay, much to her mother's chagrin. Remus therefore agreed with Harry. "I think you might be right, but I imagine everyone else will be receptive to the idea. And perhaps Hannah's family would like to come along as well."

Harry's grin grew even wider. "I'm sure they'd love it."

"Then get changed into something suitable, and I'll be back," Remus said, before vanishing.

September 1st 1996

Remus put the last book in place on the bookshelf. "This feels so wrong, Cordie."

Cordelia put her arms around Remus' waist. "You're the Headmaster now, Remus, and this is your office. You have to get used to it, just like all those headmasters on the wall did before you."

The painting of Albus, which had only recently awoken, looked down on the couple. "She's right you know, my boy."

Remus looked up. "I still wish it were you here."

"Don't forget that I'm always here to offer advice should you need it," Albus said. "But I would never have made you deputy head when I did if I hadn't believed that you could deal with the responsibility of having to step into my shoes if something happened to me."

Remus wished that this portrait could tell him what had happened that day in the office, but it had been painted some time before then, and did not possess those memories. "It still feels wrong."

"And I felt the same way on my first day as headmaster," Albus admitted. "But Hogwarts needs you, and I have every confidence in your abilities."

Remus could therefore do little but thank Albus. "I appreciate it."

"That's more like it," Albus said, and then still being a new painting, he gave a yawn. "I think I'll take a nap."

"Let's eat," Cordelia suggested as Albus closed his eyes and nodded off, and she tugged Remus through to the new rooms they were going to occupy.

Cordelia spent the next half an hour watching Remus pick at his food, before she got to her feet, moving around the table and climbing onto Remus' lap. "I think you need to take your mind off tomorrow."

Remus was far from in the mood for what he knew Cordelia had planned. "Cordie!"

"I'm not listening," Cordelia said, as she began a slow exploration of Remus' neck.

As she found the spot on his neck that was the most sensitive, Remus groaned despite his initial lack of enthusiasm. "Cordie, trying to take my mind off tomorrow with sex isn't going to work."

"Are you sure?" Cordelia asked as she deliberately wriggled her bottom against him.

"Yes," Remus barked out, very much on edge.

Cordelia gave a sultry grin as she felt Remus' body beginning to react. "Liar!"

"I have things I still need to do," Remus said as Cordelia returned to nibbling at his neck.

"Leave them until later," Cordelia suggested, biting gently at his earlobe.

"But I..." Remus' words died in a groan as Cordelia sucked lightly at the earlobe she had captured with her mouth.

Cordelia released Remus' ear to answer him. "You have all day before the pupils arrive tomorrow."

Remus shook his head. "I need to make sure everything is ready."

Cordelia let her hand slide down below Remus' waistline, and she repeated her earlier comment. "Leave it."

"I can't," Remus said, still worrying about what he had left to accomplish.

Cordelia nipped lightly at his neck as her hand caressed Remus over his trousers. "You're telling me that you would prefer to do boring paperwork rather than make love to your wife?"

"Yes," Remus said, although he was lying.

Cordelia called his bluff by sighing and removing her hand. "Oh well, it was worth a try."

She then went to get up, only for Remus to stop her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To unpack some of my clothes," Cordelia said, although she suspected that she was not going to be continuing that chore anytime soon.

She was proved right as when she tried to rise yet again, Remus held her firmly against him as he began his own exploration of her neck, before whispering in her ear. "I don't think so. You're going to finish what you started."

"But I thought your work was more important," Cordelia teased.

"Minx!" Remus exclaimed as his mouth nibbled at the pulse in Cordelia's neck.

As his hold around her waist loosened off, Cordelia slipped out of Remus' arms and held out her hand. "Come with me, and I'll show you how much of a minx I can really be."

And Cordelia proved her words, as ten minutes later both of them were unclothed and in bed, Remus' paperwork long forgotten.

Next Chapter: Harry gets to talk to Albus' portrait; Severus schemes and Harry initially thwarts his plan; Bill has news.

Chapter 61: The Cassus Cartouches

September 4th 1996

Harry nervously coughed, and then he called out to the snoozing portrait of Albus. "Excuse me, Professor Dumbledore."

Albus jerked awake. "Harry, my boy, what can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to you about something," Harry informed him, sitting on the edge of what was now Remus' desk.

Remus had already talked to Albus about what had happened when Albus had died, and so Albus had some idea why Harry wanted to speak to him. "Is this about what Amelia asked you to do, or about my wand?"

"It's sort of tied in," Harry said, before going on. "Do you think I did the right thing by not killing you when she asked me to?"

Albus countered this with a question. "Do you?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"Then you did the right thing," Albus said. "And even though I have no real idea of what was going on in my mind when I tried to destroy the Horcrux, I can say for certain that I would never have asked you to kill me, not even to take ownership of the Elder Wand."

Although he had defended his right to refuse to Amelia, the whole thing had still been playing on Harry's mind. "Thank you for telling me that, Sir." He then brought up the subject of the Wand. "Do you think Voldemort has the Elder Wand?"

"I do." Albus lifted up the painted version of his famous wand as he confirmed his belief. "I can see no other explanation for its disappearance, and I relayed this to Remus when I spoke to him yesterday evening."

"We haven't had a chance to talk since then," Harry said. "He's holding a detention at the moment."

"Already?" Albus asked, sounding a little disappointed.

Harry nodded. "Aunt Cordie said that two of the seventh years got into a fight outside of his classroom yesterday."

Albus sighed. "Don't tell me. Gryffindor and Slytherin."

Harry shook his head. "Actually it was a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor. One accused the other of cheating at cards. From what Luna told me this afternoon, they're actually supposed to be best friends."

Albus tutted. "And Remus went as far as assigning a detention?"

"Aunt Cordie said a girl got hit in the face with a rather nasty spell when they started fighting," Harry explained, feeling the need to defend his guardian.

"Ah!" Albus exclaimed, his disappointment at Remus' judgment call vanishing with understanding. He then brought up something that Harry had said. "I see you are calling Cordelia 'Aunt Cordie' now."

Harry nodded. "Yes, Sir. She said that she and Remus want to adopt me."

Albus detected a slight hint of reservation. "Don't you want that, Harry? I seem to recall you wanting a loving family more than anything when you looked into the Mirror of Erised."

"I already love Remus and Aunt Cordie," Harry said, wanting to make it clear how he felt about his guardians. "But if I go that one step further and say yes to the adoption, even though they're dead, I'm almost afraid I'm going to betray my real parents."

"And did Miss Lupin-Lovegood feel the same way about her adoption?" Albus asked, trying to get Harry to see it from a different perspective.

Harry shook his head. "No. She said that her parents would be happy that someone loved her enough to adopt her, just like Remus and Aunt Cordie have done."

"And James and Lily would feel the same way, my boy," Albus said in a soft voice, "which is one of the reasons why they appointed

godparents for you; they wanted you to have someone who could take their place should something happen to them."

Making the decision to think a little more about the idea of adoption in the light of what Albus had said, Harry thanked him. "Thank you, Sir."

"Glad to be of help, Harry." Albus then gave a slight yawn. "Was there anything else you wished to talk about?"

Harry remembered Remus' comment that, being a new portrait and having only recently woken, Albus still tired easily, and he hurriedly brought up his other major concern. "Just about Snape. Why do you trust him?"

"I'm afraid that it is between Severus and myself." Even after his death, Albus refused to tell anyone his reasons for trusting Severus. "And although I know you will never see eye to eye with him, I am confident that he had nothing to do with my demise."

"That's what Remus said," Harry responded.

"Then perhaps you should listen to him," Albus chided Harry gently.

"I suppose so," Harry said, although this time he was not quite as convinced by Albus' reassurances. Seeing Albus' eyes drooping, Harry knew that his time was up. "Thanks, Professor."

"You're quite welcome, my boy, quite welcome," Albus said, and then closing his eyes he quickly fell back to sleep.

September 30th 1996

Severus watched the potions class file in. He still had no idea how Harry had managed to gain an Outstanding in potions, but unfortunately he had, and as such was attending his class. "Don't just flap about. Get your parchment and quills out."

Harry preferred the class lectures to the actual potion making, and he hurried to do as ordered. Next to him, Hermione did the same, as did Hannah and Justin, who were sitting behind them.

Severus was about to make a comment when Hannah gave a tiny gasp of pain. "What is it, Abbott?"

"Nothing, Sir." Hannah then stuck her finger in mouth.

Severus scowled. "You should know better than to put your fingers in your mouth in this classroom."

"I have a paper cut, Sir," Hannah explained, after whipping her finger out of her mouth. "And I didn't touch anything except for my piece of parchment."

"On your head be it," Severus snapped, and then he looked askance at Hannah as she rose up out of her seat. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To throw this parchment in the bin," Hannah said, as she approached the front of the room. "It has blood all over it."

"Make it quick, girl, and then sit down," Severus barked out, before swinging around to face the blackboard. As he did so, a thought suddenly occurred to him, and he filed it away and began lecturing, "The..."

1st October 1996

After talking with Remus during the six hour drinking session they had had at a Muggle pub in July, Sirius had decided that he was going to take a chance on a relationship with Anna. However, between Sirius' work schedule and Anna's having to spend time traveling back and forth between London and New York, the two of them had so far only managed two dinner dates and a quick coffee since they had met on the night of Albus' funeral.

In the end, with no end to their haphazard schedules in sight, Sirius had taken the decision to revisit his idea of visiting Anna in New York, and so he had managed to juggle his shifts to give him an entire week off. And he was now looking forward to spending some quality time with Anna while they got to know each other better.

Heading out of the wizarding arrivals area of JFK, Sirius found the apparition area, and after collecting a book, which gave the various co-ordinates, he apparated to the point nearest to the Plaza Athenee.

However, on walking into the hotel, Sirius was more than a little dismayed to spot Anna across the foyer in the arms of an attractive young man. About to turn away, he halted as Anna called out his name. Having little choice, Sirius plastered on a smile and moved over to where she was standing. "Anna, I was just about to check in."

Anna smiled at Sirius, and leant forward to kiss his cheek. "I wondered what time you'd be getting here. Simon, this is Oscar Jameson. Oscar, Simon White."

Sirius noted the surname as he held out his hand. "You're related to Anna?"

"She's my cousin," Oscar informed him, shaking Sirius' hand. "Living on the other side of the pond, and with Anna's ridiculous schedule, it means that we don't get to see each other that often. Our meeting today was only by chance."

Sirius experienced a profound sense of relief that this man was only Anna's cousin. "I know the feeling."

Oscar noted the look Sirius and Anna shared at Sirius' comment. "I was just trying to talk her into having dinner with me tonight but she refused, and now I think I know why."

"You're welcome to join us," Sirius immediately offered.

Oscar shook his head. "I don't think so but thanks for inviting me." He turned back to Anna. "How about dinner tomorrow night?"

"How about lunch tomorrow?" Anna countered, not wanting to give up her evenings with Sirius. "I was planning to take Simon to see the Statue of Liberty."

Oscar stared in amazement. "Isn't that rather a Mu..."

He was stopped by Anna's hand being slapped over his mouth, before she glared at him and removed it. "Yes, it is a rather mundane touristy thing to do, but Simon's never been to New York before, and I don't want you talking him out of it."

Oscar caught on quickly. "I'm sorry. I should mind my own business."

Sirius had also caught on to what Oscar had been about to blurt about, and he had to hide his smile at the young man's slip. "Thank you for the warning but run-of-the-mill or not, I'd still like to see the Statue." He then smiled at Anna, and he decided to leave her alone to have some time with her cousin. "If you'll excuse me, I'll see you at seven tonight here in the lobby."

Once Sirius had headed over to the reception desk to check in, Oscar turned on his cousin, latching onto the subject that Anna had prevented him from bringing up a few moments earlier. "He's a Muggle?"

"Yes," Anna said, more than a little annoyed at the look on Oscar's face. "And before you say anything, don't! Mum has already lectured me about dating a Muggle, and she's warned me that he's only after my money." She gave a tiny grin. "But what she doesn't know is that Simon is well off enough to turn down half a million pounds."

Oscar had no idea what Anna was talking about. "What?"

Anna quickly explained about Sirius' apartment and the offer her father had made. "So I'm quite sure he's not after my money."

"It's nice to know that he's not a gold digger, Anna, but he's still a Muggle." Oscar said the word 'Muggle' as if it was something disgusting. "And he's obviously older than you."

"He's 36," Anna admitted, Sirius having told her his age when they had last gone out to dinner together.

Oscar shook his head. "Anna, it's obvious you like him but think about what you're doing. If things got serious, you'd be asking for trouble. He's probably only going to live until he's in his seventies, maybe a little more. And you'd only be fifty and you'd still have another fifty or more years left. Don't do this to yourself."

Anna had already had this argument with herself and lost it. "It's too late for warnings, Oscar. I'm already crazy about him."

"And does he feel the same way about you?" Oscar asked, concern for his cousin utmost in his mind.

"I doubt it," Anna said. "Although I've known him since May, we only really got together in August."

"And yet you think you're in love with him?" Oscar's response was rather disparaging.

Anna corrected Oscar. "I didn't say I was in love with him, just that I'm crazy about him."

"If you're dating a Muggle you must be." Oscar's voice still held a note of scorn.

Anna loved her cousin but he was rather narrow-minded when it came down to blood purity. "Don't even go there, Oscar." She checked her wristwatch. "I'm going for a walk, and then I'm going to get showered before I join Simon for dinner. And despite your misgivings about Simon, you're still welcome to join us tomorrow for lunch."

Oscar shook his head. "I'd rather not." He kissed Anna's cheek. "Just be careful."

"I will," Anna promised, and she then turned and headed out of the door.

November 15th 1996

Harry grumbled as he walked along. "I hate tests."

"Harry, you know you'll do fine," Hermione assured him, slipping her hand into his.

"But its potions," Harry protested.

"And you'll do fine," Hermione repeated.

Harry continued to grumble right up until they reached the entrance to the potions classroom, where he reluctantly let go of Hermione's hand and went inside to sit down. About to take his things out, he

was stopped when Severus barked at him, "I will be providing parchment and quills, Potter."

Harry hid his scowl as he took this to mean that Severus was intimating that Harry would be cheating. As the rest of the class members trickled into the potions classroom in dribs and drabs, Severus repeated his comment about the parchment several times, making Harry reluctantly admit to himself that maybe he was wrong about Severus singling him out.

Bang on the top of the hour, Severus flicked his wand at the classroom door to seal it, before picking up a sheaf of parchment and stepping forward. "If during the test you require a second sheet, put up your hand." He then began to hand out the parchment to each student, together with a quill.

When he reached Harry, no-one noticed Severus taking a piece of parchment from the bottom of the pile and handing it over. As Harry reached out to take it, he grimaced as the paper sliced into his hand. "Ouch!"

Severus feigned irritation as blood from the somewhat deep paper cut blossomed onto the parchment. "I have enough problems reading your appalling scrawl, Potter, without having to fight to see what you've written through your blood."

Severus intended to snatch the parchment away, but Harry pulled out his wand and used a spell to clean his blood off it before Severus could take it. Furious that he had been thwarted, Severus barked yet again at Harry. "And this time try and keep it clean, Potter."

"Yes, Sir," Harry said, and he then used his wand to quickly heal the small cut on his finger before settling down to begin the test.

December 6th 1996

Calico Grove, London

At the ringing of the doorbell, Lucy wandered out into the hallway and opened up her front door to find Bill Weasley standing there. "Hi, Bill. How did you know I was here?"

"I ran into Cordelia this afternoon in Diagon Alley when she was doing some Christmas shopping, and she told me that you'd be here," Bill said as he followed her into the hallway and then into a smallish blue and white kitchen. Noticing that there were two half empty wine glasses on the table, he asked, "Am I interrupting something?"

Lucy peeked into one of the pots she had simmering on the stove. "No, Dae just left."

Bill sat down and sniffed the air. "He didn't want to stay for dinner?"

Lucy shook her head. "He's just finished a big case and decided to give himself a break, so he's heading off to Italy this evening for a weekend break."

"And you're not going with him, even though you have the weekend off?" Bill asked in surprise.

"The answer would be no. We're not seeing each other anymore, and haven't been for a while." Although Lucy had to admit to herself that 'seeing' was not the right word, she knew she could hardly say 'shagging' to Bill.

"I honestly thought that the two of you were still dating," Bill said.

"No, he's actually seeing a girl from the office above his," Lucy told Bill, although once again, she doubted that 'seeing' was the right word. "He was only here today because he knew that I had no university classes, and that I'd be here instead of Hogwarts, and so he came by to drop off a copy of some paperwork for this place that he's filed at the Ministry for me."

Bill's nose wrinkled up again as Lucy lifted another lid and the smell of jasmine rice reached him. "So everything is final then?"

"Yes." Then seeing Bill sniff the air yet again, Lucy made an offer as she carried a pot to the small but functional glass table. "Seeing as Dae didn't want to stay and eat dinner, would you like to share some curry with me? I should warn you though that I like it spicy."

Having worked in Egypt as well as other foreign countries, Bill's palate was used to such foods. "Suits me. Can I help with anything?"

Lucy opened up the stove and took out the naan breads she had been keeping warm, as well as moving a second pot from the stovetop over to the table. "Not unless you want to go down into the cellar and get me another bottle of white wine to go with this."

"Beer would be better." Bill knew only too well from experience that the curry would likely overpower the wine. "Let me go out and get some."

Lucy took some natural yogurt out of the cool box, got an additional plate for Bill, and rooted out some beer glasses, before sitting down and waiting for him to return. He was back in less than five minutes, and she questioned the goods he was carrying. "Muggle beer?"

"It tastes far superior to anything we can make." Bill was far from fond of wizarding beer, the choice being rather limited compared to the varieties of Muggle beer. "I got a mixed selection as I don't know what you like."

Lucy picked up a bottle of Stella Artois and opened it. "I've had this before, so I'll play it safe this time."

Bill picked up the same. "Cheers."

Lucy raised her bottle and took a swig of the beer, ignoring the glasses she had gotten out. "That tastes good." She then served Bill some of the rice and curry, before helping herself. "So what brings you here?"

Bill swallowed a mouthful of the extremely spicy curry before answering. "I think I've tracked down your cartouches."

Lucy fork stopped halfway to her mouth. "Really?"

Bill nodded. "I was involved in an excavation just outside of Cairo, and we unearthed some cartouches that are covered in diagrams that are most definitely not of Egyptian origin, which is rather unusual, and so I thought they might be the ones you're looking for."

Lucy placed her fork down, her attention on Bill rather than her meal. "Who do they belong to?"

Bill explained the background to the dig and his involvement. "A man named Edward Cassus is funding the dig but essentially he has already agreed to pass the cartouches on to the Egyptian government. They're the ones who contracted with Gringotts' Cairo branch to head up the dig, and since I've got a fair amount of experience of these sorts of digs, they brought me in to analyze some of the wards. It was just luck that I was there when they unearthed the cartouches. They're being moved to the magical section of the Cairo Museum once they've been cleaned and catalogued."

"Will the find be made public?" Lucy asked, resuming her meal.

Bill shook his head. "Finds like this turn up all the time, and it's no big deal. They're simply catalogued, placed in the Museum, and as far as those who are interested are concerned, it's just another piece of history. So yes, they're public in that sense, but there will be no big announcement about them."

"I have to see them," Lucy announced, feeling excited.

"When they go on display, I'm going to let Remus know," Bill revealed. "But you won't be able to get a look at them before then as they've already gone off-site to be cleaned."

At the mention of Remus' name, Lucy asked whether he knew about the cartouches yet. "Did you pass this onto Cordie when you saw her?"

"Yes, but it was a brief chat since her portkey was due to leave," Bill confirmed. "That's why she gave me your address. She said that you could get the details and relay them back." He then took another mouthful of his food before remarking on the quality of it. "This is really good. Perhaps I could take you to dinner at the same time you view the cartouches to say thanks for letting me share this."

Lucy liked the younger redhead, and she therefore agreed to his offer. "I'd like that."

The two chatted amenably as the evening wore on, before Bill got up. "I'm afraid I have to leave. I'm expected back on site first thing in the morning but I'll contact you once the cartouches have been cleaned and go on display."

Lucy walked him out into the hallway. "I'll fill Remus and the others in on what you've told me when I get back to Hogwarts on Sunday." She then leant forward and kissed Bill's cheek. "Goodnight."

Bill really wanted to kiss Lucy properly but he took his cue from her and so instead of doing so, he copied her by kissing her cheek, and he then bid her goodnight before vanishing.

26th December 1996

Hermione looked around with interest as they approached a glass case. "Did you know..."

Harry interrupted her. "I think you've told me everything I need to know, Hermione."

Hermione was well aware that Harry was not in the slightest bit interested in Egyptian history. "I've only told you the brief details."

"And that's all I want to hear," Harry said, smiling with relief as Bill came towards them. "Hi, Bill."

"Hi, Harry, Hermione." Bill shook hands with Harry first, and then did the same with Hermione. "Where is everyone else?"

"Dae and Lucy are already here somewhere, and Sirius has taken Luna to the bazaar together with Hannah and Justin, but they're going to come by later," Harry said, Bill having been filled in on the truth about Sirius.

Bill had been surprised to learn about Sirius' survival, but having been shown numerous memories to back up Sirius' innocence, Bill had easily accepted Harry's godfather. He had even gone as far as to entreat the Goblins to rescind the Ministry's hold over Sirius' properties, swearing an oath that the Ministry had no real claim over them. The Goblins, as Sirius had found out when he had been able to access his vault, did not need much persuading to thwart the Ministry, and they had therefore revoked the Ministry's claim on

Sirius' homes, returning full ownership to Sirius but refusing to tell Amelia why they had removed her authority over them.

But even though the Goblins had given back what was his, so far Sirius had shown no interest in returning to any of the houses except for Black Lake Cottage, a small cottage in the Lake District. As for the Black Estate and Grimmauld Place, Sirius had far from fond memories relating to both properties, and he had told Remus that he'd happily let them rot before he stepped foot back inside either of them.

Having discovered where almost everyone else was, Bill brought up Remus, who, like Hermione and Lucy, had been one of the most enthusiastic about viewing the Cartouches. "And Remus?"

"Aunt Cordie's not feeling well, and so he's staying at the hotel with her," Hermione said.

"But Sirius has checked her over and he said it's just the food," Harry tacked on, spotting the concerned look on Bill's face.

"And what about Dudley?" Bill asked after the last person in the group, as he suddenly remembered he had forgotten about Harry's cousin.

"He's sitting by the hotel pool," Hermione informed him, her voice filled with exasperation. "He said he didn't want to look at moldy old fossils."

"I thought Remus had said Dudley that was interested in history," Bill remarked, as he led the way to the room that housed the newly named Cassus Cartouches.

"He is," Harry confirmed. "But he's just as interested in getting a suntan, eating food, and lounging around."

Bill showed his pass to the guard on duty. "I'm expecting two others, Dae Venant and Lucy Viking, to be here shortly." The guard acknowledged this, and stood aside.

Hermione was rather excited to be able to see the cartouches. "I thought you said yesterday that they were going on display to the general public."

Bill revealed why they were still in a back room. "They will be in a couple of days but wards are still being erected, and so for the moment we're mostly relying on old fashioned guards."

Hermione frowned. "Wards?"

"The cartouches are very old," Bill explained. "And after they were catalogued, it was decided that they're probably quite valuable, and so security is being put in place to safeguard them." He stopped before a large glass case and held out a hand. "These are them."

Although he had no true interest in Egyptian history, Harry was rather intrigued by the strangely marked slabs of stone, which for some unknown reason sent a small shiver down his spine. "Do you think these are really what we're looking for?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't have any true reference or pictorial evidence to refer to, so I honestly don't know."

Hermione was almost transfixed as she stared at them. "As much as I hate to say it, I've got a feeling that I've seen these before."

"Then I'd say that they're what we're looking for," Harry declared, trusting in Hermione's instincts. "We need to take a photo to show the others."

Bill shook his head. "You can't. There are some wards in place already, and an anti-photography ward is one of them. You're lucky enough to own a pensieve so that you can share your memory of them that way."

Dae and Lucy chose that moment to make their entrance. "Hi, Bill."

Dae watched Bill's face light up as he greeted Lucy, and he had a sneaking suspicion that the redhead was interested in her. Deciding it was none of his business, Dae held out his hand. "Bill, it's good to see you again."

Bill shook hands with Dae. "These are the Cassus Cartouches, if you want to take a look."

After Lucy and Dae had looked at the cartouches, everyone left the room and headed back out into the main magical section, where Dae looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I have to leave. I have a client meeting in less than an hour."

"I'd like to look around more while we wait for Sirius and the others to get here," Hermione said, making Harry groan.

"So would I," Lucy seconded Hermione's idea. "Harry, if you want to apparate back to the hotel, I'll wait with Hermione for the others."

Bill had already arranged to take the day off, and so he made an offer. "I have the day free, and I'd be happy to show you both around the Museum. I need to be here to get Sirius past security, and I know quite a lot about both the Muggle and wizarding sections so I can act as your guide while we wait."

Harry gave Lucy and Bill a grateful look. "I'll go back and join Dudley then."

Dae nodded at Lucy. "I'll see you on Monday for dinner." He then shook hands with everyone else, before heading for the apparition point, Harry trailing in his wake.

Hermione subsequently wandered off, her interest caught by a crocodile mummy that lay up ahead, and Bill joined Lucy, deciding to try and discover how things stood between her and the wizarding lawyer. "I thought you weren't dating Dae anymore. You looked pretty cozy with him last night."

Like Dae, Lucy had the feeling that Bill liked her and that his rather probing remark stemmed from jealousy. "As I told you at the start of the month, Dae is seeing someone else, and next Monday's dinner is not a date. He has the final paperwork ready for me to sign on the land I've bought next to my new house, and since Dae has back to back meetings all day on Monday, and Tuesday is New Years Eve, I suggested that we have dinner on Monday night. Otherwise, I'll be back at Hogwarts, and finding it difficult to find the time to get together with him to finalize everything."

The mention of Hogwarts reminded Bill of something he wanted to ask. "How do you feel about Charlie joining the staff as the new assistant flying coach?"

"I'm fine with it," Lucy said, now pretty certain that she was right about Bill's interest. "And it's only until for six months until Mara returns from sabbatical." Lucy stayed on the subject of Bill's brother. "I have to be honest, based on Charlie's all-encompassing passion for his job, I'm surprised he agreed to take up the position, even on a temporary basis."

"He's doing double duty; a new weyr of dragons has been discovered in the Welsh mountains, and Charlie will be dividing his time between Hogwarts and setting up a new reserve." Bill drew to a halt as Hermione stopped at a case just ahead of them. "I thought Remus would have told you."

"As he only made the announcement a few days ago about Charlie taking over, and I've been busy, I've really only had time to get the bare bones from him," Lucy told Bill.

Bill raised an eyebrow. "Busy during the holidays?"

Lucy listed what she had been doing. "I've been spending a lot of time doing research, visiting my family in Boston, dealing with the landscaper who's going to work on my new piece of land to turn it into a garden, and studying for my final advanced transfiguration exam, which is set for the last day of the Easter term."

Bill whistled. "I'm surprised you had time to spare to view the Cartouches."

"I'm fed up with studying for the advanced transfiguration exam. I kept messing up silly little things, so I knew that I needed to take a step backwards from it. As the exam doesn't take place until Easter, although I really shouldn't, I made the decision to take a breather from it to come out here," Lucy explained as she glanced up ahead, keeping an eye on Hermione.

"What's been happening with the upper level transfiguration classes up until now?" Bill asked, aware that Albus had been covering them until he had died.

"The same as before," Lucy said, "except for a difference in teacher. I've been covering the first to fifth years, and instead of Tonks doing

it because she was finding it too much, Professor Jones has been taking the sixth and seventh years."

"So there's going to be some big changes in transfiguration when the pupils return in April then," Bill noted.

Lucy shook her head. "Not really. We've agreed that Professor Jones will finish off the year so as not to disrupt the students."

"Probably a good idea," Bill said, glancing up ahead to where Hermione had gotten some distance away from them. "She looks as though she's enjoying herself."

"Hermione is like an intellectual sponge." Lucy smiled as she could see Hermione picking up various leaflets as she went along. "She soaks up everything she's exposed to."

"Harry didn't seem so keen on this place," Bill noted.

"I think Hermione will still try and cram some of what she's discovered down his throat tonight," Lucy said with a grin.

"I can think of better ways to spend my evening," Bill commented, before using the opening to his advantage. "Such as taking you to dinner if you'd like to go."

"I would love to," Lucy immediately accepted, deciding to take a chance on Bill. "Is seven okay?"

"Seven will be fine," Bill said, going into the bookstore that Hermione had wandered into. "I think we'd better go and help Hermione."

Lucy was hardly surprised to see that in the space of a few minutes, Hermione seemed to have picked up half of the bookstore, and she hurried to give the girl a hand, spotting Sirius and the others coming their way as she did.

Later that evening

Luna half-heartedly looked through the books that Hermione had brought back. "I'm bored."

Hermione put down the book she was reading on mummification, and frowned. "You don't sound bored. You sound miserable."

"Did you know that Lucy and Bill have gone out tonight" Luna asked, trying to sound casual.

Hermione, however, knew immediately what was wrong. "You like Bill, don't you?"

Luna was aware that Hermione would wrinkle the truth out of her if she denied it, and so she admitted to the truth. "Yes."

"Don't you think he's a little old for you?" Hermione asked, trying to turn Luna off the redhead.

"He's only nine years older than me," Luna countered.

"That's still quite a big age gap," Hermione said, aware that she had another 'Luna crush' on her hands.

Luna brought up an example of a similar situation. "Sirius is fifteen years older than Anna and no-one says anything about that."

Hermione hesitated, unable to think of anything to say straightaway. Then she settled on, "that's different."

"How?" Luna demanded to know.

"It just is." Hermione was still unable to come up with a reason for the difference, and so she reiterated her earlier comment. "And I really think that you're too young for Bill, and that Lucy is a far more suitable age."

Luna scowled. "But it's not fair. Lucy had Dae and now she's got Bill."

"They're only having dinner, Luna," Hermione said, trying to placate a very unhappy Luna.

"But she's going to take him off me," Luna wailed.

Hermione sighed, aware that her conciliatory stance had failed. "Luna, you haven't got Bill in the first place for Lucy to steal him away from you."

"But we spent all day together yesterday. I really like him, and I thought he liked me," Luna said, trying to get her point across.

"Luna, we all spent yesterday with him," Hermione argued. "It was Christmas Day!"

"I know that," Luna snapped in exasperation. "But he kept getting me drinks, and he spent ages talking to me about his dig."

"But that doesn't mean he sees you as girlfriend material," Hermione had to point out. "And Bill was just as nice to all of us, including Lucy."

"So you're saying that he sees her as girlfriend material?" Luna asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes," Hermione said. "She's not fifteen, and, she's therefore a little more knowledge than you about some things, Luna."

"You're talking about sex, aren't you?" Luna asked, her voice slightly hostile and snotty.

Hermione ignored the tone, aware that Luna was genuinely upset. "Yes. Luna, Bill is in his twenties, and I think he has more needs than just kissing and holding hands. And even though I know it hurts, Lucy can give him that, and you can't."

"Yes, I could," Luna argued. "I'm nearly sixteen, and..."

"...you're never had sex or know the first thing about it," Hermione interrupted.

"You could tell me," Luna said. "Then I'd know."

Hermione blushed. "Harry and I haven't had sex yet."

Luna's mouth fell open in shock, her thoughts about Bill diverted by the news. "But I thought you had. Harry's been sixteen for ages."

Hermione frowned. "Luna, just because you turn sixteen and are dating someone, it doesn't mean that you're automatically going to have sex."

Determined to try and find out what she needed to know, Luna dug deeper. "But you've done other things, haven't you?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted in a voice that said 'but it's nothing to do with you and so don't ask'.

Luna ignored the tone and asked anyway. "So you could tell me what to do, at least up to a point."

Hermione knew she might have known that Luna would ignore her unspoken warning and she shook her head. "No, I couldn't, Luna. It's not just that it's personal, it's..."

As Hermione struggled to find the right words, Luna tried to second guess her. "...too naughty to tell me?"

Hermione gave a reluctant smile. "No. It just that's it's not perfect. Neither of us really know what we're doing, and it's trial and error, and certainly of no use to you."

Luna was unable to resist teasing her friend. "You mean you haven't looked at a book?"

Hermione shifted in embarrassment. "Yes, but it's not the same as the real thing."

Desperate to find out what she need to know, Luna brought up a topic that she knew was really rather taboo. "But what your dream about having sex with Thomas Seville? You said you enjoyed it, and so he must have known what he was doing."

Hermione was about to rip into Luna for bringing it up when she decided to try and use the dream to her advantage in arguing her point. "He did."

Luna perked up, thinking that Hermione was going to give her more details. "And what about you?"

"It wasn't exactly me," Hermione reminded Luna. "And..."

Luna jumped in, believing Hermione was going to lecture her. "But you must know what a man wants because of it."

"Actually I don't," Hermione said, and she went on to tell Luna what she had been about to when Luna had interrupted. "Even though I experienced what Mione experienced, the dream was actually a sexual encounter between a married couple who were deeply in love, and they were both aware of what each other liked. Which means..."

Luna interrupted Hermione yet again. "How do you know they were married?"

"They were wearing wedding bands and I just knew," Hermione said. "But that's beside the point. What I'm trying to say is that if you had sex with Bill it would be nothing like what Mione and Thomas had."

Luna mulled this over for a few moments before responding, and proving that she understood what Hermione was trying to tell her. "So you're saying they were making love, and if I went after Bill it would just sex with no loving bond."

"Exactly." Hermione smiled before her face clouded over as she recalled some of the dreams she had so far had. "Despite of who he was, I know that Mione loved Thomas heart and soul, and I want you to have the same thing."

"I thought you didn't believe in romantic love," Luna said, surprised at Hermione's comment.

"I didn't," Hermione had to say. "But as I said, I could feel what she felt, and although it's taken me a while to admit to it, romantic love is the only thing that could describe Mione's feelings for Thomas. But it was..." She hesitated before going on. "...it was more than that. When she looked at him it felt as though he was everything, and it almost hurt, Luna. It's just hard to describe."

Luna sighed, her quixotic nature thrilled by what Hermione had revealed. "I know Thomas was Voldemort and all that, but I still think it's rather romantic." Luna glanced over at Hermione. "Do you think that Mione and Thomas are together like Mummy and Daddy are?"

Hermione shook her head, and admitted to something that she had not really wanted to face up until then. "I doubt it. If I have her feelings and memories, then I think that somehow she's a part of me now, just like Remus said that his counterpart is a part of him." Remus' dreams had been far more plentiful than Hermione's and he had eventually accepted that somehow he had been someone else.

Luna, however, was more interested in Hermione and her dream than in any dreams that Remus might have had. "And have you told Harry about the dream yet?"

Hermione nodded, her face softening. "It wasn't very nice telling him but he was so wonderful and understanding, and then he told me he loved me and that it didn't matter."

Luna crossed her fingers as she asked her next question. "And do you love Harry?"

Hermione blushed. "Yes."

Luna gave an even bigger sigh than she had earlier. "And do you love him like Mione loved Thomas?"

"No," Hermione answered truthfully before going on to explain. "At least not yet. Harry and I are still discovering each other, and we don't have the sort of bond that Mione and Thomas appeared to have had."

"I'd like something like that with Bill," Luna said, sighing sadly as she thought about Bill again. She looked over at Hermione. "Do you really think I have no chance with him?"

Hermione didn't, and so she slipped off the bed and moved across the room to hug Luna. "I'm sorry, Luna, but as much as I would like to say yes, I really think that this one's just not meant to be."

Across the city, completely unaware of what was happening back at the hotel, Lucy was laughing at a story Bill had just told. "It sounds as though he bit off more than he could chew."

Bill grinned. "Quite literally."

Lucy giggled and wiped her eyes. She then took a swig of her beer. "You have no idea how nice it is to talk about something other than transfiguration, the Pillars, or Horcruxes."

Bill thought she looked so much more relaxed than she had done the last time he had seen her at the Museum. "Is that what you and Dae usually talk about?"

Slightly drunk, Lucy missed that Bill had singled out Dae's name. "No, we talk about all sorts of things."

Even though she had agreed to go out to dinner with him, Bill could not quash the little voice that said Lucy was still interested in Dae, despite her protests otherwise. He therefore persisted in questioning her about the man. "So what do you talk about then?"

Her mind clouded by the alcohol, and not able to pick on anything particular, Lucy came out with a generic answer. "Adult stuff."

Bill raised an eyebrow. "Adult stuff?"

"You know," Lucy said, waving her hand in the air. "Stuff like work and things." She smiled a little sloppily at the redhead. "Dae's a little more serious than you, and he doesn't know how to have a good time, unlike you."

Encouraged, Bill changed the subject, and they then moved on to talk about other things until Lucy unexpectedly commented on Dae's inability to have fun when Bill was talking about a scrape he and his friends had gotten into during their last dig. "P'raps I should ask Dae to go on an expedition with you and your mates. He might not be so sherious then."

"Sherious?" Bill questioned Lucy's slurred word. "I think you're drunk, Lucy."

"Nah," Lucy said, a little giggle escaping her. "Well, maybe a little. But what do you think about my idea?"

Bill pulled a face at the thought of spending time with a man he thought was a little uptight. "I think not. Could you imagine what the sand would do to his two hundred Galleon Cygnus shoes and his thousand Galleon Idris Suit?"

Lucy recalled what Dae had been wearing in the Museum. "Ooh, you're right, he was wearing rather unshuitable shoes." She took yet another swig of her beer and giggled. "And his shuit was rather wrong as well, jus' like him.

Hearing her slur her words even more, Bill decided that Lucy most positively had had too much to drink. "You're definitely drunk."

"I'm definitely jus' tipsy," Lucy owned, taking yet another mouthful of beer, and talking more slowly to try and avoid slurring when Bill raised an eyebrow at her pronunciation of 'just'. "I had a few shots with Shirius before I came out because he's missing Anna."

"He should just be honest with her," Bill said.

"He's scared of upshetting her," Lucy told him, her words slurring yet again. Then she frowned when she tried to take another mouthful of beer, and got nothing. "Oops. I'm empty." She waved at the waiter.

"Are you sure you should be having another one?" Bill asked, far from convinced it was a good idea.

"Yes," Lucy said, wanting only to relax and nothing else. "I want to have fun."

As she drank her next beer, Lucy began to slur even more although she tried not to, and when she got up to go to the bathroom, she swayed and giggled. "I thinks I might be drunker than I thought." She giggled again as she tottered backwards into Bill. "Oops, my bad."

"You're definitely drunker than even I thought," Bill said, getting up and looping his arm around her waist. "Let me pay for our drinks and I'll get you back to the hotel."

When they apparated in, Lucy clamped a hand to her mouth and headed for the bathroom, swaying precariously before dropping to her knees to be sick into the toilet. She was thankful that Bill left her alone, and after swilling her mouth out, she rummaged in her toiletry bag and found a couple of potions, one to settle her stomach and the other to sober her up. Then she headed back out into her bedroom, her dismay written all over her face. "Merlin, Bill, I'm sorry about that."

"It wouldn't be the first time I've had a woman vomit on a date with me," Bill commented wryly.

Lucy winced. "I'm really am sorry. I went overboard. But it's the first time I've really been able let my hair down in ages, and you were such fun to talk to." She walked out onto the balcony and dropped down onto a chair to look out over the darkened desert, lit by a now waning moon. "I'd almost forgotten what it was like to do that." She glanced over at him. "But I shouldn't have drunk as much as I did."

Bill could hardly say that he had never done the same, and really liking Lucy, he made her an offer. "Would you like to go out again tomorrow, and maybe we could try having a conversation without the alcohol."

After spending this second evening with him, and despite how drunk she had gotten, Lucy knew that Bill was only friend material, and she tried to let him down gently. "I would love to out with you again but..."

"...you only like me as a friend," Bill finished the sentence.

"For a man you're very perceptive," Lucy acknowledged, before going on. "Bill, I like you, you're fun, and it was great for my ego to go out with a younger man but..."

Bill interrupted yet again. "...you like Dae."

"You're back to being a typical man again," Lucy said, a smile crossing her face. "I was going to say but I'm too busy to be in a relationship with anyone right now. And although I know it's not what you wanted to hear, I'd like it if we could be friends, which is something I can say that I'm most definitely not with a shit like Dae, despite how things might appear."

Bill was more than a little disappointed, but he took it sportingly on the chin. "I seem to have a knack of making friends with women rather than them seeing me in a romantic light, but I suppose at least they don't all think I'm a shit."

"I could if it would make you feel better," Lucy offered, a big grin on her face.

"I think I'd better take the offer of friend," Bill said, rising to his feet. "So are we still on for dinner tomorrow night?" He then quickly added. "Just as friends, of course."

"We are but I'm buying this time," Lucy confirmed. "I'd kiss your cheek but I need to brush my teeth."

Bill held up both hands. "In that case, friend or no friend, I'll just settle on exchanging smiles." He then proceeded to do exactly that, his grin friendly but a little disappointed. "Goodnight, Lucy."

"Goodnight, Bill."

29th December 1996

Luna sat on the edge of the pool, her feet dangling in it. She looked up as a shadow fell over her. "Hello."

Bill sat down beside her. "I thought you were coming out with me on the dig today. Remus said that you didn't feel up to it, and so I thought I'd check on you and see if you're okay."

"I'm fine. I'm just not really in the mood to go out on the dig," Luna said, not wanting to watch Lucy laughing and joking with Bill, as she had been doing for the last three days when the group had spent time together.

"We're all going out for dinner afterwards," Bill said, thinking she was feeling down at having to return to school. "You can even pick the restaurant."

Luna scowled at him, and barked out a response. "I'm not six, Bill."

Bill's eyes widened in surprise at Luna's out of character curtness. "I didn't say you were, Luna. I just thought you might like to choose seeing as Hermione, Harry, and Hannah have all had a chance to pick so far." His eyes grew bigger as Luna burst into tears. "Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing," Luna sobbed, unable to tell him the truth.

Totally unaware that he was the problem, Bill put his arm around the blonde girl. "Don't you feel well?"

"I'm fine," Luna said, leaning into Bill, her tears falling onto his white shirt.

"Then what's up?" Bill asked gently, concerned for Luna.

"Nothing," Luna repeated.

Bill decided that this was girl talk for 'I don't want to talk to you about it', and not knowing what else to do, he treated her as he would have done his younger sister. "I tell you what. Why don't we forget about the dig and I'll take you on a camel ride instead?"

Even though she wanted to protest again that she wasn't six and couldn't be bribed with a childish camel ride, Luna was rather taken with the idea, and so she finally looked up. "Really?"

Bill was rather pleased that he appeared to have done something right. "Really. If you go and get something on to cover yourself up, I'll tell the others about the change in plans."

Luna's happiness evaporated when she realized that everyone else would be going but short of telling Bill that she didn't want to go now, and acting like a spoilt child, Luna had little choice but to do as Bill said.

In the end it turned out only to be Bill, Lucy, Luna, and Harry who went on the ride, everyone else not fancying the idea. Luna was beyond delighted when Bill let her ride up with him, both Lucy and Harry riding behind guides. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Apparating in the desert is hard," Bill said. "There are some fixed apparition points but not for where I'm usually going, and so I've learned to ride a camel."

"But you could remember where you need to go," Luna said, not getting it.

"The digs are usually protected by wards and hidden," Bill told her. "There are some unscrupulous wizards out there, and they'd be delighted to try and steal what we're trying to salvage. So the

Egyptian magical government has therefore banned all apparition into digs."

"But can't you just apparate outside of where you know the dig is?" Luna asked.

"Sand dunes move and shift, and so if you try to use a memory of one as a point to lock on to, you could end up anywhere," Bill said. "So that's why camels are the next best thing, and I really enjoy being able to relax and think about things while I'm making my way to the dig."

Luna glanced across at Harry, who was rather green. "I don't think Harry is enjoying this."

Harry proved Luna right by sliding right off his camel and throwing up in the sand. Bill immediately stopped his own camel and lowered it down, helping Luna off before running across to Harry. "Are you okay?"

"I felt sick this morning and the up and down motion isn't helping," Harry said, before he threw up again.

Lucy, who had ordered her guide to stop, also got off her camel and knelt beside Harry, taking his arm. "I'll take you back. I don't have any potions with me."

Just thinking about being side-apparated made Harry sick again, and he looked up at Lucy, his dismay at the idea very evident. "I'll do it myself."

"I think not," Lucy said, tightening her grip on his arm, before she turned to Bill and Luna. "I'll see you two later."

Bill had noted Luna's concerned look as the pair vanished. "Do you want to go back?"

Even though she felt sorry for Harry, Luna was thrilled that she finally had Bill to herself, and she shook her head. "Sirius will look after him."

"Then let's get on," Bill said, and he turned and headed towards his camel.

Luna had a blissful day with Bill, the two of them even going on to the dig now that Luna's mood had improved, where Luna was able to see some of the more unusual drawings on the walls of the tomb that had been unearthed. "That's a Snorkack."

Bill had seen some strange things during his employment with Gringotts, and he therefore merely accepted what Luna was saying, instead of belittling her comment. "We did wonder."

Luna continued into the tomb, and pointed at another strange creature. "And that's a Nargle."

Bill himself could not say what it was; it was something he had never seen before. And so again, he simply accepted Luna's comment at face value. "I'll make a note of it. Let's go see if you recognize anything else."

Luna beamed happily, thinking her day could not get any better.

But it did, when, after spending several hours exploring the tomb, Bill checked his watch. "We're a bit late for dinner with everyone else. Remus said they were going to eat at five and it's six now. Do you want to come to dinner with me instead as it's my fault we're going to be too late to eat with the others?"

Luna quickly nodded. "Yes, please."

Bill repeated his offer from earlier in the day. "Since you've done so much to help with identifying some of the paintings today, I think you should be the one to pick where we get to eat."

"I'd like Thai food," Luna declared, having been introduced to the spicy food at the start of the week.

"Then we'll go to Le Meridien in Cairo," Bill said. "They have a great Thai restaurant."

Throughout the meal, Luna babbled happily about the various paintings on the tomb walls, their ride, and Hogwarts. When it was over, she let Bill apparate her back to the wizarding hotel they were staying in. When they reached her room, even though Luna badly wanted to kiss Bill, she was well aware from her talk with Hermione

that he would react badly to it, and so instead she hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for a wonderful day."

"I'm glad you had a good time, Luna," Bill said, ruffling her hair in an affectionate manner. "It was enjoyable for me too."

Luna was about to open her hotel room door when she decided to ask Bill for something. "Can I write to you when I'm at Hogwarts? I want to know what's going to happen to the stuff you showed me in the tomb, and what the creatures I didn't know were."

Not for one moment realizing that Luna liked him, Bill unwittingly fanned the flames of her interest in him by agreeing. "Of course." He looked around and then winked conspiratorially. "I'll even send you pictures of anything new."

Luna was beside herself, and she hugged Bill briefly again before letting him go. "Thank you."

Bill kissed Luna's cheek. "I'll see you at Potter Place for dinner tomorrow night." And then he vanished.

Hermione was in bed reading when Luna let herself in, and she put down her book in horror at the state of Luna's hair. "What happened to you?"

Luna looked down at herself, unable to figure out what Hermione was talking about. "What do you mean?"

"Your hair," Hermione said, pointing at a mirror. "Go look."

Luna looked in the mirror and giggled at the tussled mess her hair had become. "That was Bill."

Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God!"

Rolling her eyes, Luna dropped onto Hermione's bed. "He ruffled my hair with his hand when he was wishing me goodnight."

Hermione wondered why Bill would be ruffling Luna's hair. "Did he kiss you?"

"I thought you said he wouldn't be interested," Luna said, bringing up what Hermione had said earlier in the week.

"He wasn't, was he?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

Luna thought about teasing her friend but she could see that Hermione was genuinely worried and so decided against it. "Of course not. He was the same with me as he was on Christmas Day."

Having decided that Bill had treated Luna properly, and not encouraged Luna's crush, Hermione relaxed. "So did you go to dinner?"

"He took me to a Thai restaurant at Le Meridien," Luna was smiling as she answered. "What about you?"

"I stayed in with Harry," Hermione said. "Even though he wasn't being sick anymore, he couldn't face food."

Luna began to get ready for bed. "What was wrong with him?"

"Sirius said it was just his stomach couldn't deal with the local food," Hermione explained. "So he gave him some potions and made him lie down."

"What about Mum?" Luna had also started called Cordelia 'Mum', just like Harry had started doing after his adoption had been finalized at the start of November.

"Remus actually took her and Harry home when he got back from dinner while they were feeling better," Hermione said. "Lucy and Sirius are going to escort us all back tomorrow instead."

"But Harry and Mum okay, aren't they?" Luna asked, now a little worried.

"They're both fine," Hermione assured her friend. "Sirius said that it was the food in both cases, and it was he who suggested they went back while they're both feeling better."

Luna relaxed. "Good. So what are you reading?"

Hermione reached over and grabbed her book. "It's another one on mummification."

Luna's stomach went over at the rather graphic pictures. "Hermione!"

Hermione grinned. "A bit gruesome, isn't it?"

"It's horrible," Luna said, and she shivered. "I'm going to have nightmares now."

"Then think about Bill instead then," Hermione suggested, now that she was reassured that Bill was not fueling Luna's fantasies, and this crush would die a death as easily as the others. Sadly she had no idea how wrong she was.

Next Chapter: Harry and Hermione get closer; Sirius decides to come clean; Luna gets a nice surprise.

Chp62